

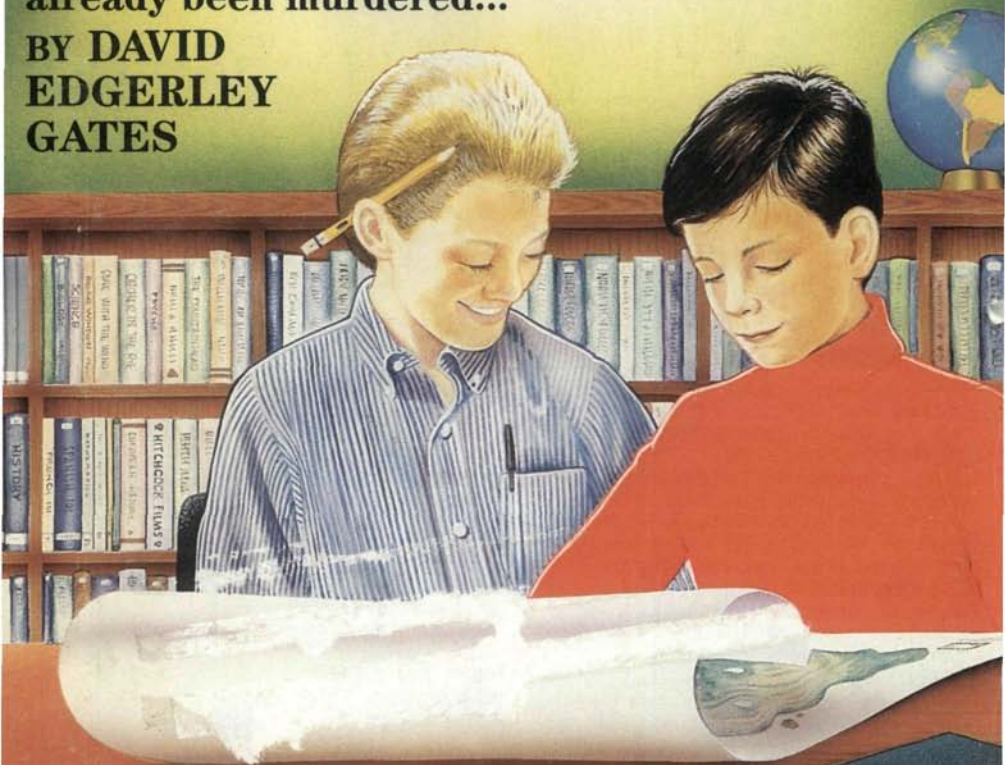
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAGAZINE

JUNE 1998

KICK THE CAN

The boys knew the private school's terrain, but the P.I. in charge of them didn't like the odds. The dean had already been murdered...

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EDGERLEY
GATES



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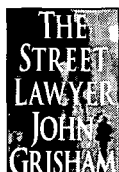
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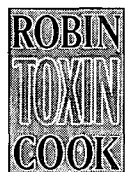
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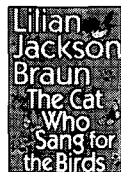
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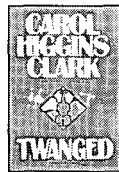
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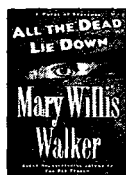
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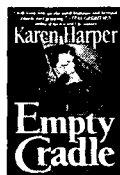
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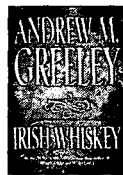
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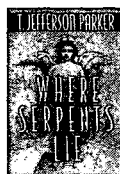
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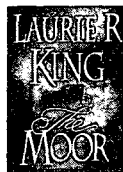
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

What's about an inch taller and a quarter of an inch wider than it used to be? AHMM, of course!—you're holding it in its new size.

We're actually *exactly* what we were, though; the pages are fewer, but the new size completely makes up for the difference. We promise. There is absolutely just as much fiction inside as before, and the new size gives us two things that we didn't have: better margins all around so the magazine looks more attractive and you can read it more easily and—this is also important—a much improved newsstand presence.

The competition is rough out there (just think of how many magazines there are), and that extra inch, our newsstand director says, lets our logo fully show over the top of the newsstand wall pockets where magazines the size of AHMM and our sister magazines EQMM, *Analog*, and *Asimov's* are often displayed. (Yes, we've all changed at once.)

We hope it will make us easier to find!

Speaking of logos, we also hope you like our jazzy new one. We thought the old one had had its day, and this looked like a good time for a change. . . .

We have two new authors in this issue to introduce to you.

Sherry Decker, whose first mystery is "Hicklebickle Rock," is from the state of Washington, has written a dozen other stories and two articles for the U.S. Volleyball Association's National Tournament Program, and took first place last year in the North Texas Professional Writers Association annual fiction contest.

Wendy Leeds, author of "What Are the Odds," has written two novels, *The Child Sellers* and *Cameo*, published in the early eighties by Leisure/Tower Books. She lives in Massachusetts, is a graduate of Tufts University, and teaches creative writing.

Finally, don't miss the note at the bottom of page 102!

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FICTION

Kick the Can

David Edgerley
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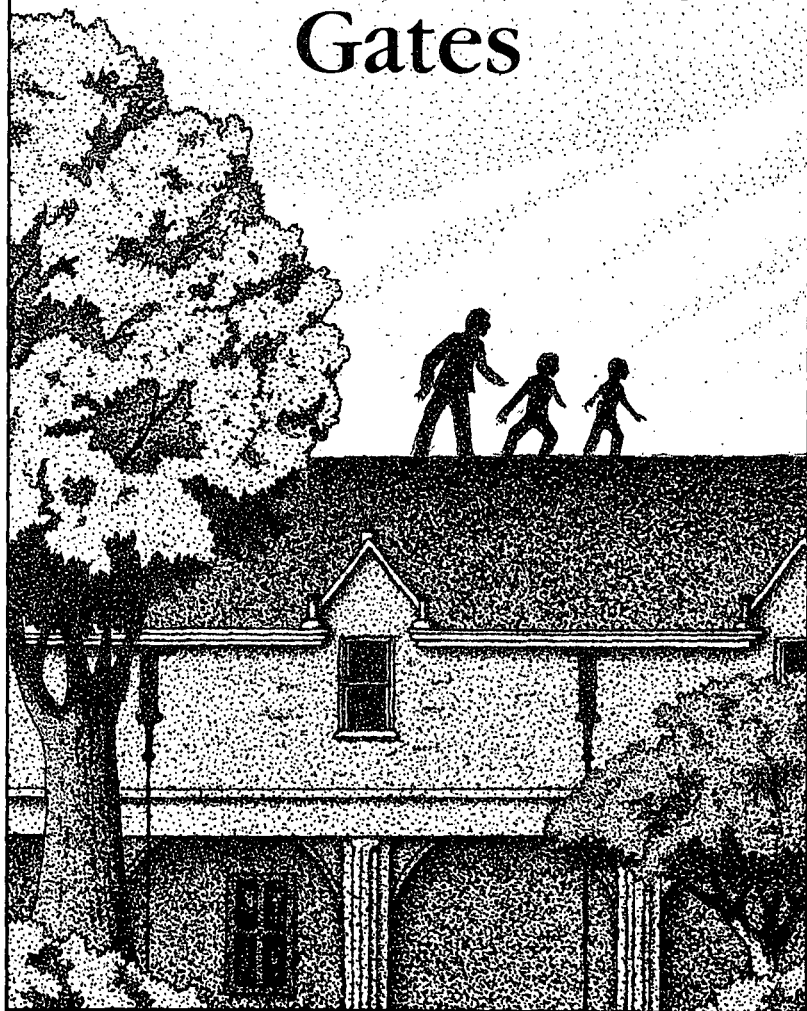


Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 6/98

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“I’m not a babysitter,” I told Duke Skinner.

“Nobody’s asking you to be Mary Poppins,” he said. “You only have to keep the kid under wraps for a couple of days, just over the weekend. Then you deliver him first thing Monday morning, in time for the hearing.”

Duke was an attorney, and this was a divorce case. He was representing the wife. I’d done the odd favor for him in the past, but this one sounded iffy. It all too often happens that it’s the kids who get caught in the middle when a custody fight turns ugly. “We should both find a better line of work,” I remarked.

He shrugged. “Pay’s the same, good or bad,” he said.

“Does your client really think her ex is going to try to snatch their kid?”

“Frank Macafy’s a control freak,” Duke said.

“How much trouble is he likely to give me?” I asked.

“He won’t know Tommy’s with you.”

“What about Tommy’s mom?”

“Irene doesn’t know who I’ve interviewed for the job.”

“Is that why you’re not using what’s-his-face?” I meant the bruiser Duke usually refers his sticky cases to.

“He’s looking out for Irene,” Duke said, smiling.

I nodded. The guy we were talking about had once gone ten rounds with Jersey Joe Walcott and lost the decision, but he’d managed to stay on his feet. He

had the same name as one of those famous Elizabethan poets, Marlowe or Sir Philip Sidney, somebody like that. It escaped me at the moment. He was a tough cookie, genteel name or not.

“Frank Macafy tries for his ex-wife, he’ll be one surprised son-of-a-bitch when he wakes up in the hospital,” Duke said. “She’s already got a restraining order against him.”

“Maybe you should get a restraining order on her security detail,” I said. “What do you need me for?”

“I don’t want to spread myself too thin.”

“You’re over a barrel, in other words,” I said. “That’s why you’re asking me to take care of the kid.”

Duke grinned. “Beggars can’t be choosers,” he said.

The big New England private academies have come quite a way since Holden Caulfield’s time back in the 1950’s and ’60’s when they were stuffy, snobbish, single-sex institutions (male, most of them) modeled along the lines of English boarding schools with spartan accommodations, cold-water lavatories, fierce athletic competition to keep young minds too busy for base thoughts, and quotas excluding Catholics and Jews. The occasional black face was a diplomat’s son from Nigeria, not an inner-city kid on a basketball scholarship. Nowadays they enroll boys and girls in

equal numbers and admissions are based on merit, not breeding or bias, but they retain their cachet as proving grounds for the Ivy League colleges and charge accordingly.

Me and my brother Tony didn't have the background to get into prep school even if our father could have afforded it, and neither of us would have been much at home in that setting. We were working-class people, French-Canadian from up around Leominster, and our family life revolved around the church and my brother's hockey. Turning into the grounds of Tommy Macafy's school late that afternoon, past the playing fields and the gym and then up the long circular drive to the nineteenth century red brick administration building, I felt a twinge of resentment. I realized I was still carrying a chip on my shoulder.

I parked in the turnaround and got out of my car. The last, late snow was melting into the ground, and you could smell the damp earth. The maples were just starting to bud. I walked to the front entrance.

The brass plaque at one side of the door identified the building as Founder's Hall, and gave the date of its construction. I went inside. The entry lobby was a wide passage through the building, with a set of french doors on the far side. It was intersected by another corridor running lengthwise, and at the center a seal was let into the polished floor, set in a compass rose. The Latin motto

read FORTITER GERIT CRUCEM. Falling back on my half-remembered phrases from the missal, I teased out a meaning that was serviceable enough: Strength Overcomes Adversity.

I crossed to the french doors. They gave onto a quadrangle canopied with elm and copper beech, the bare branches not yet in leaf. It was bounded by dormitories and classroom buildings, and a gallery ran around the perimeter at ground level. None of the buildings was more than three stories high, which gave it all a human scale except that there was no one in sight. It was Easter break. Most of the faculty and student body were gone for the week. It put me eerily in mind of a museum after closing time; when the visitors have left and the guards begin to turn out the lights.

My appointment with the dean of students was at a quarter after four. I made my way down the corridor, going from door to door and looking at the titles stenciled on the frosted glass. I got to the dean's office, knocked, and stepped inside. There was nobody there. Stern oil portraits of former headmasters gazed down from their frames. I had the feeling I used to get when I was called into detention, back at Saint Francis Xavier. I tried to shrug it off.

The door of the inner office opened, and a tall gent with mild eyes peered out at me over a pair of half-glasses.

"Jack Thibault," I said. "Thibault with an h."

"Dean Fowler," he announced. We shook hands, and he led me into his office. He had white hair, cut short over the ears. It was vaguely military. He leaned his bony rump against the edge of his desk. "So," he said, "you're here to collect Tommy."

I handed him my driver's license and my P.I. ticket. "You want to see some major credit cards?" I asked him.

He didn't seem amused. He ducked his chin and regarded me for a moment over the lenses of his glasses. I saw that what I'd taken for mildness in his gaze was only a slight astigmatism. His eyes were blue and hard as porcelain.

He studied my I.D. for what seemed like a long time before he gave it back.

"Sorry," I told him. "I can understand how you might be leery of me."

He shrugged unhappily. "We can't take sides," he said. It sounded like the so-called royal *we*.

"Neither can I," I said. "Which isn't to say I don't have sympathies of my own, but let's make this as painless as possible. Where's Tommy now?"

"Waiting for us in the library," Dean Fowler said.

We went out into the corridor again. "You've got kind of a skeleton crew on duty," I remarked to him.

"We have people who stay over," he said. "Some exchange

students, the occasional child of a broken home." He bent a dour look in my direction. "It's an inconvenience, but a few masters stay on, to help supervise the ones left behind."

"Can't be much fun for them," I said.

"Oh, the faculty doesn't mind," he said.

I wondered if he'd deliberately misunderstood. It probably wasn't the first time.

Fowler took me back across the main entrance hall to a pair of tall oak doors. They swung open easily. He gestured me through ahead of him.

The library was longer than it was wide, and there must have been stacks in back. Tall windows opened on the quadrangle, and indirect sunlight was reflected off the lawn outside. When the shade trees leafed out later in the spring, it would still be bright, but the light would be muted and drowsy. Along the inside wall, shoulder-high bookcases were filled with reference works. Wide trestletop tables took up the middle of the room, with reading lamps under green glass shades arranged for sharing. It had a cordial atmosphere of an earlier and perhaps easier time, and smelled of worn books and cracked bindings, furniture wax and much-handled back numbers of the *National Geographic*. In short, it felt comfortable and traditional, in spite of the computer terminals set up next to the old fashioned card catalogue.

The two boys were in the far corner, heads bent together like conspirators, studying what looked like a large chart unrolled in front of them, taking notes and whispering eagerly to one another. They looked up as we approached, wary as a brace of fox kits surprised in their den, but they scrambled to their feet as we got to the table; showing off their good manners, or a certain discipline. Their expectant faces were clear and untroubled.

One was a towhead, his blond hair almost white and a peaches-and-cream complexion to match. The other boy was dark with thick glossy hair as shiny and black as a crow's feathers and olive skin.

Dean Fowler introduced us. Tommy was the blond kid. The dark one was Nicky Saroyan; I took him to be an exchange student. I noticed the barest hint of an accent, slightly sibilant, when he shook hands and spoke to me with courteous reserve. Tommy was more frankly suspicious, but the two boys regarded me with equal parts curiosity and caution like any other fourteen-year-olds, who know enough to keep their secrets safe from grownups. Both were staying at school for the Easter vacation, since they had nowhere to go.

"What's the project?" I asked them, gesturing at the big topographical map they had spread out on the table.

"Tactics," Tommy said.

"Strategy," Nicky corrected him.

They looked at each other and grinned.

"It's for the Game," Tommy explained. The way he said it, you could hear the initial capital and his excitement at devising some kind of daring plan.

"The game?" I asked.

"It's awesome," Tommy said.

"*Formidable*," Nicky agreed, nodding vigorously. He gave it the French pronunciation.

"We're going to be on the same team," Tommy told me. He shot the dean a quick worried look. "We *are*, aren't we?" he asked him.

"Of course," the dean said, smiling, and I suddenly saw a side of him I hadn't seen before, boyish if stiff, and shyly complicit in their enthusiasms. It made me feel better about him.

"My car's out front," I told Tommy. "It's unlocked."

"I'll get my stuff," he said. "Come on," he murmured to Nicky. "You can help."

Nicky looked stricken.

The dean tried a few phrases in labored classroom French on him, to the effect that he could go with Tommy.

Nicky ducked his head and replied in quick, liquid syllables. He was almost too fast for me, his syntax quite different from the Quebec patois of my own grandparents. It occurred to me that he seemed no more a native speaker of French than he was of English, for all his facility in both. The two boys nudged each other and then boiled out of there like mice out of a sock.

"Nice pair of kids," I said.

Dean Fowler nodded, looking after them. "David and Jonathan," he remarked. He glanced at me. "You remember your Bible, Mr. Thibault?" he inquired.

"The way I remember the story, they had to hide out in a cave because the king wanted to kill them," I said.

"I didn't mean that literally," the dean told me. "I meant simply that they're devoted to each other. Tommy has his share of problems, which you're well aware of. Nicky's a long way from home. They both feel somewhat abandoned, if I don't miss my guess, and they club together. They confide in each other as boys are apt to do."

"I was one once if memory serves," I said. "I can remember what fourteen was like."

"It shows," he said with a slight smile.

I looked at the map on the table, trying to read the contours upside-down, but I wasn't familiar enough with the lay of the land for it to do me any good. "What's with this so-called game Tommy was talking about?" I asked.

"Oh, it's a very old tradition," Dean Fowler said. "Why don't you ask Tommy to tell you about it?"

"Better than asking him how he feels about his parents' divorce," I said.

"Much," the dean observed dryly.

*

Tommy Macafy sat quietly on the far side of the front seat as we left the campus, gazing out the window. He'd piled a mountain of stuff in the back seat, duffel bags and sports equipment, clothes on hangers and what looked like dirty laundry, about seventeen pairs of designer sneakers tied together by the laces, and a camping outfit, tent pegs and all, that lay in a lump on the floorboards behind me. It looked as if he didn't think he was coming back. I didn't rearrange the load, or even ask him about it. He had enough on his mind, and I figured let sleeping dogs lie. He felt like talking, he'd get around to it in his own time.

We were only a little over an hour and a half from downtown Boston, but out here in the countryside it was a quite different world, between the wooded and the sown as the dean might have put it. The last few loops of the Charles River wandered through stubble-cut fields and along the boundary of the schoolgrounds, barely navigable. The river opened up past the Watertown arsenal, and in Cambridge it served as a practice course for the crews from Harvard and MIT that rowed eight-oared shells in competition. It widened to a quarter mile at the Basin, behind the dam at the river's mouth that regulated the tidal flow from Boston harbor. For years it had gotten dirtier and dirtier, and now that serious steps were being taken to clean it

up, it was odd to see the river so near its source shallow and turbid, its banks choked by underbrush, a sluggish country stream, unprepossessing and almost unattended.

There's a story that the Vikings sailed up the Charles back in the eleventh century and established a settlement at Gerry's Landing across from where Harvard Stadium is now. I remarked on this to Tommy, trying to make conversation, but he didn't see anything significant in it. Kids are in a place we've all been but can't easily recover.

I tried a different tack.

"Looked to me like you and Nicky were plotting a campaign," I said. "You plan on taking over study hall, holding it against all comers?"

That got an impatient smile out of him, but at least he turned away from the window to try to explain it to me. The way he told it, it sounded pretty complicated. "The whole school's divided up into two tribes, Mohawks and Hurons," he said. "The school-grounds are territories. Upper-classmen are sachems, war captains, freshmen and sophomores are, like, cannon fodder."

"Rank has its privileges," I commented.

"No, it's because the old boys, they all know each other's names," Tommy said. "That's how it works. You see somebody you know on the other team, like Nick, then you call out, *Nicky Saroyan, shot, shot*, and he has to go and report himself in as a ca-

sualty. That's just an example. Everybody knows Nick because of who he is."

"I thought you guys were going to be on the same team."

"Well, sure we are," Tommy said. "The dean said so."

"So, anyway, it's like a big version of Capture the Flag or Kick the Can," I said.

No, Tommy said, this was *serious*. They'd had a whole year to get ready for it, looking at yearbooks so they knew the upper-classmen's names and could shoot down the captains, exploring the grounds and finding the best hiding places, gaming out different attack scenarios. "We're going to be skirmishers," he told me. "Feeling out the other side's defenses. Hit-and-run. We've got Intelligence, too. I don't mean like spies, that'd be cheating, but figuring out their Order of Battle, how they're going to deploy."

"Knowing the terrain and picking your fight," I said.

"Yeah, exactly," Tommy said enthusiastically. "It's a real military operation, like Desert Storm. You've got to prepare for it and know the ground backwards and forwards."

I felt on unfamiliar territory myself. "Listen," I told him. "Maybe this isn't the easiest thing in the world for you to handle right now, but you're not in custody. You don't have to think like a prisoner of war."

"But you're supposed to guard me," he said.

"I'm just supposed to keep a weather eye out," I said. "You're

due in court Monday morning. What we do in the meantime is up to you."

He nodded tentatively, and regarded me sidelong. "Can we order out for pizza?" he asked.

I'm not going to admit the kid suckered me. Let's just say he took advantage of my better instincts. I thought the less I second-guessed him, the better, and maybe that was my mistake, to treat Tommy as an adult instead of a kid. I try to treat people as if they know what they are up against.

We got back to my place, and Tommy humped a bag out of the car. He wouldn't let me help him with any of the gear in the back seat, and I respected him for it. It wasn't up to me to make sure he had a toothbrush and clean underwear.

Boston was playing the Bulls, and we settled in to watch the game together. We'd already called in our pizza order, more than either one of us could safely finish. Tommy wasn't watching his cholesterol, but he asked for no anchovies, no olives, and no onions. I took off my jacket, but I was still wearing my gun. Tommy looked at it out of the corner of his eye, obviously fascinated, but he didn't ask me to take it out and spin it around on my finger like the Lone Ranger. When the buzzer to my apartment rang, Tommy volunteered to go down and bring up the pizzas. I told him to take what he needed out of my wallet. It was on the

sideboard near the door, next to my car keys. I was pretty confident he wouldn't rifle my billfold. I figured I might as well cut him a little slack. I kicked off my shoes.

All the same, when he started downstairs, I got up off the couch and went over to the window. My apartment's on the second floor, and even though it was getting dark, I had a good view of the street. My own car was at the curb, and the pizza guy's truck was double-parked. I didn't see anything wrong with the picture. Tommy paid the delivery guy, the delivery guy got back in his truck and drove off, but Tommy didn't close the lobby door and come back inside. He went down the steps to the street, carrying the pizzas. I swore under my breath and started to back away from the window, and then I stopped. Tommy had only gone as far as my car.

I glanced over at the table by the door. Tommy had copped my keys. I looked down into the street again. He fiddled with the keys, opened the car door, and slipped a pizza box into the back seat, glancing around furtively.

It took me a minute to tumble. You little slyboots, I thought, the both of you. That's why all the stuff was piled up behind the seat. I had to hand it to them.

I couldn't let him get away with it, but I was of two minds how to handle it. Then the decision was taken away from me. Across the street I saw a dome light come on in a parked car,

and two people got out. The guy who'd climbed out of the driver's side called to Tommy. I went out my apartment door in my socks and scrambled down the stairs like a bat out of hell, grabbing for the banister to keep my balance and almost losing my footing.

Tommy had moved away from the curb and started backing up the steps again uncertainly, holding the pizza boxes out in front of him for protection. I came out of the lobby door behind him. "Looks like you've bitten off a little more than you can chew," I said.

"It's my dad," he said. "I don't want to go with him. He wants to take me out of school."

"We'll see that doesn't happen," I said.

He glanced up at me. "You're not going to hurt him, are you?" he asked.

"Not if I can help it," I told him. I walked the rest of the way down the steps and waited on the sidewalk for the two guys crossing the street.

Frank Macafy had size and the physical confidence that goes with it, but I'd already made him for a bully. He had his hands shoved into the pockets of his windbreaker like he didn't need to use them. The muscle he'd brought along was more dangerous, compact and middle-aged, without swagger but watchful. He had the look of a club fighter, battered face and cauliflower ears, who could take a serious beating and still come back to

hurt you in the last few rounds.

I didn't place him right away, and then I remembered. Wally Sachs.

"How you doing, Wally?" I said.

"Not so bad, Jack," he replied. "Yourself?"

"Can't complain," I said.

Frank Macafy looked from one to the other of us with an expression somewhere between outrage and contempt. "What the hell is this?" he demanded.

"The better part of valor," I said.

Wally looked down at his feet with a small smile.

"That's my son," Frank Macafy said. "My wife is trying to take him away from me. I'm not going to let it happen. I only put up with so much before I get pissed."

"You can put up with it until Monday," I said.

"Tough guy, huh?"

"Spare me," I said wearily.

"We'll see how tough you are," Frank Macafy said.

Maybe it was genetic, or something in the food he ate. Too many Twinkies. He was beginning to rub me the wrong way. "Look," I said, "this is something for the courts to decide. You got a beef with your wife, don't take it out on the kid. You're already in violation of a restraining order, so why make it worse? If you walk away now, then as far as I'm concerned, this never happened."

Frank Macafy snorted. "Bust him, Wally," he said.

Wally looked at me.

"You see how it is," he remarked regretfully. "I got an obligation." He took a step forward. "I don't want to have to do this, Jack."

"You don't have to," I said. I took out the .40 Smith and held it down, alongside my leg. "Either one of you makes a move, I'll pop your kneecaps."

"Jesus, it's just a divorce, Jack," Wally said, stepping back and holding his hands out at either side, empty.

I looked at Frank Macafy.

"You and your wife can sort out your differences in front of a judge," I said. "Leave me out of it. And let Tommy make his own choices."

"You haven't heard the end of this," he said.

"You don't know how long I've been waiting to have somebody tell me that," I said.

"We'll see who gets the last laugh," he told me.

"Quit while you're ahead, Frank," I said.

He turned away, steaming, and stalked off toward his car. Wally Sachs gave me a quick shrug and a look like we'd shared a secret, and then he followed Macafy.

They got back into the car and pulled away.

I beckoned Tommy down off the stoop. He dragged his feet, not meeting my eyes. "Listen," I said. "It's got to be rough, what you're going through. You don't want to have to choose between your parents and you might even think you're partly to blame, but

I can't help you with that. You're going to have to work it out for yourself."

He nodded, embarrassed and still not looking up at me.

"I'm not asking you to treat me like a pal," I said. "But since we'll be keeping each other company for a day or or two, you can treat me with a little respect, and try not to insult my intelligence. I'll return the favor, okay? And we won't make this any harder than it has to be."

"Okay," he said, almost inaudibly.

I held out my hand, and he gave me the car keys. I unlocked the Cutlass and tipped the driver's seat forward. The inside of the car smelled of oregano and melted mozzarella. "The jig's up, Nicky," I said. "You might as well come upstairs and be comfortable."

I had the boys settled on the couch in front of the TV, wolfing down pizza and watching the game. Jordan already had half a dozen rebounds. I called Dean Fowler from the wall phone in the kitchen where I could keep an eye on the fugitives but just out of earshot. The dean picked up on the third ring, sounding worried, and I told him who was calling. "They're both with me," I said.

"Well, that's a relief," he said.

I explained how Tommy had smuggled Nicky out under his clothes. "Where there's a will, there's a way," he observed.

"Yeah," I said. "look, don't be

too hard on them, okay? Tommy's got a row to hoe, and friendship counts for a lot."

"It's a serious prank," he said, "but I'm certainly not going to expel them for it. Give me at least a little credit for common sense, Mr. Thibault."

"Speaking of common sense, Frank Macafy showed up on my doorstep and I had to run him off," I said. "How did he find out where Tommy was?"

The dean cleared his throat awkwardly.

"That's what I thought," I said.

"He was extremely agitated," Dean Fowler said. "He said that Irene, Tommy's mother, had no right to spirit Tommy off without notifying him. He is the boy's father after all, and he has certain rights. We can't take sides in this as I told you this afternoon."

"All right, so you caved in."

"He waxed exceeding wroth," the dean said. "He threatened the school with a lawsuit, as well as me personally."

"He's got a big mouth," I told him. "I wouldn't worry about it. After the hearing he may not have the standing to sue you anyway."

"Water off a duck's back, Mr. Thibault. I've had parents try to intimidate me before, as well as alumni donors, trustees, what-have-you. It comes with the territory. That's not why I told Mr. Macafy where he could find his son. I thought it might be in his best interest."

"Next time think about Tommy's best interest," I said.

"I am, and I'm trying to strike a balance," he said.

"I believe you," I said. "So am I. We'll take a ride out there in the morning and bring Nicky back, unless you can see your way clear to letting him stay here with Tommy."

"I can't take that responsibility," he said.

"Then we'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked.

"We're both in a position where we get a little too involved," the dean said. "In loco parentis, you know. You're doing the best you can, by your lights." He hung up abruptly, saving us both further embarrassment. For all his Yankee flintiness, Dean Fowler was a softie at heart.

The game went into overtime before Chicago finally beat Boston, and I let the boys stay up to watch the finish. Then I made sure they brushed their teeth while I opened up the couch and put fresh linen on it, but I didn't make them say their prayers when I tucked them into bed.

Maybe that was an oversight. I turned out the lights and wished them sweet dreams, but I didn't say it aloud. Lying in my own bed reading before I went to sleep I could hear them, still awake, talking quietly and excitedly to each other in the darkened living room, hatching bigger plots.

It was a chastened and somewhat somber bunch who trooped up the steps of Founder's Hall the next morning. The boys had had a chance to think things over, and they looked guilty. I didn't feel so hot about it myself, but I had different reasons. Tommy was being cut adrift to sink or swim. Nicky was an emotional lifeline.

The buildings and the campus seemed more deserted than ever. The three of us went down the hallway to the dean's office. As before, the outer room was empty. I knocked on the door to the inner office. There was no answer. I opened the door.

He was sitting behind his desk, arched back in his swivel chair, his eyes wide with terror, but he was past fear now. There was a lot of blood. It smelled acrid and earthy.

I stepped back immediately, blocking the doorway, but Nick had already looked past me. "Stay put," I said to them.

Tommy started to ask a question. Nick poked him. I went inside and closed the door behind me.

He'd been strapped into the chair and his wrists secured to the armrests with duct tape. The backs of his hands were bruised and raw with burns. The burns might have been made with cigarette butts. Then they'd cut his throat.

I picked up the phone on his desk. The line was dead.

I went back out to talk to the boys, closing the door on the

murdered man. "Listen," I told them urgently. "We've got big trouble here. We'd better saddle up and get out of Dodge before it catches up with us."

Tommy looked at me in distress. "My dad—" he said in a shaky voice. "My dad's not part of this."

"Your dad might have a lot to answer for," I said.

"Nick says it's the Mafia," he whispered.

"Nick's been watching too much TV," I said.

"Not *that* Mafia," Tommy said. "Russian gangsters. They came here to kidnap Nick."

It sounded ridiculous, but the brutalized corpse in the next room was all too real. I looked at Nick, the back of my neck prickling.

"My father was *nomenklatura*, a party official," he said. "Now he runs a private bank in Moscow."

"I'll take your word for it," I said. "In the meantime, let's get a move on."

They both nodded, taking it seriously.

I crossed to the window, staying close to the wall, and peered around the drapes, studying the quadrangle. There was nobody in evidence, but then I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. He was standing well back in the shadow of an entryway under the colonnaded gallery. I watched but I only saw the one. I motioned the boys over.

"Okay," I said. "They've got somebody outside covering the quadrangle. Maybe they didn't

spot us when we drove up, but we can't take that chance." I thought of the burns on the back of the dead man's hands and figured he'd told them what they wanted. "It's a good bet they know I'm supposed to bring you back today, Nick," I told him. "My guess is that they're searching the dorms, and either they're careless or there aren't enough of them to go around. We'll try to make it to the car. You guys stick with me."

I eased open the door to the hallway, listening, and then I stuck my head out cautiously. There was nobody there.

"What's the office across the hall?" I asked Tommy.

"Admissions," he said.

I glanced both ways. The boys slipped past me and into the office opposite the dean's, and I followed. Tommy closed the door. We went around the desk to the window. The sill was about chest height, and I crouched just below it. I could see my car in the driveway a hundred feet from the building. It was worth a chance. I unlatched the window and slid the sash up carefully.

I looked around to see if the coast was clear. Under the window there were shrubs planted close to the foundation. I pulled my head back.

"Here's the drill," I said to the boys. "After you go out the window, keep down behind the bushes. We'll work our way along so we're closer to the car. We might get lucky."

"What if they shoot at us?" Tommy asked.

Nick smiled. "You've got insurance," he said.

Tommy looked unhappily from Nick to me.

I shrugged. "If it's true that these people are here for Nick, then they need him alive," I said. "I know what it sounds like, but it works in our favor."

"I'll go first," Tommy announced.

I made a stirrup with my hands and boosted him over the windowsill. He dropped to the ground, hugging the building. I started to give Nicky a hand up, but he pulled loose abruptly and ducked down. He jerked his chin without speaking. We straightened up slowly. Nick touched my shoulder and pointed.

"*Skorpion*," he whispered. He pronounced it *skor-PYONE*.

The guy had just walked from around the far corner of the building and stopped when he saw my car. He was dressed in sweatpants and a windbreaker, with jogging shoes and a knit watch cap. The only problem with his cover was the machine pistol strapped across his chest, and I realized Nicky had been talking about the gun itself. The sentry looked around and then took a cellular phone out of his windbreaker, punched in a couple of digits, spoke tersely into it for a minute and snapped it shut, putting it back in his pocket. He began checking out the car.

"Well, that tears it," I muttered.

"What about Tommy?" Nick asked.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," I told him.

We waited until the guy in the sweatpants made a circuit of my Cutlass and had his back turned. I quickly heaved Nick through the window and dropped out of sight again. I heard the shrubs rustle and then silence. I took a couple of deep breaths and slowly raised my head to see if we'd been made, but the boys were lying doggo and the guy with the gun had walked down the driveway fifteen or twenty feet, watching for any other unexpected visitors. I squirmed through the window headfirst and landed on my hands and knees, collapsing against the foundation with a grunt.

"*Tais-toi*," Nicky hissed at me fiercely.

Shut up. He reminded me of my grandmother.

I worked my way into a squat, and we looked through the bushes.

The guy in the sweats was walking back up the drive. A second guy came out the front of Founder's Hall. He looked like he might be the honcho, and he seemed out of sorts. He had an exasperated conversation with the guy in the sweats, who didn't have any explanation. They popped the hood of my car and pulled out the distributor cap. The guy in charge dropped it on the pavement and smashed it

under his foot. He went back inside.

"So much for the great escape," I murmured.

"We have to get out of here," Tommy said sensibly.

"I'm open to suggestions."

Tommy and Nick grinned at each other. "Come on," Tommy said. "We know the way."

They bellied down in the dirt and moved off behind the bushes, dragging themselves forward on their elbows and knees like infantrymen. I scrambled along after them.

Know the terrain and pick your fight, I'd suggested to Tommy. The boys knew the layout of the schoolgrounds, but it looked like the timing of the engagement had already been decided for us. I didn't much care for the odds. There were maybe half a dozen bad guys, some of them armed with fully automatic weapons. I had a .40 Smith with a spare magazine, a total of twenty-two rounds, and a pair of eager adolescents for scouts.

The two friendly Apaches led me around the outside of Founder's Hall and down an embankment. The complex of dormitories and classroom buildings enclosing the quadrangle was not unlike a cloister, standing on a slight rise. On the far side, to the west, were the gym and athletic fields, without any cover. On this side a narrow access road looped back up the hill, and across the road it was thickly wooded.

Once into the trees we'd be hid-

den, but we could be caught in the open crossing the road.

"They'll start beating the bushes for us soon enough," I said to the boys. "You want to risk it?"

We were still in the thicket of shrubbery, but the brush had been cut back along the shoulder of the road.

"We'll show him the secret passage," Tommy said to Nick, and they crept off again, agile as squirrels. Ye gods, I thought. Was there a hidden panel behind the bookshelves in the library?

The secret passage, it turned out, was a culvert for the storm drains. There was a catch basin for the pipes that carried the runoff, which indicated an outlet beneath the road, but the opening itself was overgrown with brambles so you had to know to look for it. Tommy and Nick skinnied down the catch basin and slithered out of sight inside the tangle of matted vegetation. I didn't have any choice but to follow. I bellied under the brittle thorns. The briars caught at my clothes like barbed wire and scratched my face and hands.

The boys were waiting for me behind the underbrush, but before I could catch my breath, they plunged ahead into the culvert. I elbowed my way in. It was arched masonry instead of corrugated metal and probably not even mortared. It might have dated back to the Druids as far as I was concerned.

I was bigger than Nick and Tommy, and in places the tunnel was too narrow for my shoulders.

I had to squeeze past the tight spots where stones had fallen out of the coping, which did nothing for my confidence. It was only forty feet or so, but I was barely halfway through and already I was stifled and claustrophobic. It was damp and clammy inside, and the stone was slippery with algae. I could all too easily imagine being buried alive if the drain collapsed of its own weight.

I began to hyperventilate, close to panic and ready to freeze, unwilling to go on and unable to back out. I clawed ahead in a fury, afraid of getting stuck, but then I slowed my pace a little, worried about being in too much of a hurry. I had to get out of there, but I had to make inches count, one after another, without looking forward to daylight at the end, just making progress and not trusting in hope.

I crawled out of the culvert at the other end in a sorry state, bruised and embarrassed and ready to weep with relief. It took me a minute to gather my wits. I didn't like being shown up for a sissy.

Nick was hunkered down at the edge of the trees, keeping watch. "I think we got away with it," he said.

"What next?" I asked them.

Nick glanced around at me with a cynical expression, as if he'd read me all too well and found me wanting. "There's the old power station, through the woods," he said.

We came up on it from behind. It was built of dressed stone two

stories high and vaguely medieval with a parapet around the edge of the roof and narrow windows that I could imagine being used by archers stationed inside. Sometime in the past the chimney had been taken down, and the bricks were stacked on pallets. We climbed up on the pallets and broke in through a window.

The equipment had been sold for scrap, and only the mounting brackets on the concrete floor indicated where the transformers had been bolted down. Our footsteps echoed in the empty space.

Nick and Tommy headed for a set of wrought-iron circular stairs, and I clattered after them. The stairs took us up to the roof, and we hunched down behind the parapet.

Our position afforded us a vantage of the main buildings on campus, a few hundred yards beyond the trees. A search party assembled in the driveway and fanned out as we watched, forming up in a loose skirmish line. I counted five in all, headed in our direction.

I looked at Nick. "What do you make of them?" I asked.

"Chechens," he said.

I stared at him. "Terrorists?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not political."

"So they're in it for the money," I said. "Hired guns."

"My father's been successful," he said.

"He took advantage of his opportunities," I remarked.

Nick shrugged, old beyond his

years. "The system under the old regime was corrupt, but at least you knew how to make it work," he said. "Now no one knows what the rules are."

"Do unto others before they do it to you," I said.

"Nick says everything's up for grabs," Tommy told me.

"What about Ming the Merciless?" I asked. They both looked blank. "The guy who came out of the main building and stepped on my distributor cap. You ever see him before, or have any idea who he is?"

Nick shook his head.

"Does your father have enemies?" I asked him.

"Of course." Nick sounded startled by the question.

"Maybe somebody has a score to settle."

"What difference does it make?" Tommy asked. "They're after Nick, whoever they are, and we can't let them have him. I mean, who cares *why*?"

"Don't overlook the obvious," I said. "These guys don't seem to cost out the body count."

"If they catch me, they'll forget about everybody else," Nick pointed out.

"Let's not even start down that road," I said. "They'll only keep *you* alive as long as they have to."

Tommy looked over the parapet. "I don't think we're too safe up here," he said, biting his lip.

I glanced past him and saw what he meant. The search party had split up, leaving two men behind to cover the road. The other three had already crossed

into the woods. The abandoned power station was the first place they'd look.

We clambered off the roof, going over the back and dropping onto the pallets, jumping from there to the ground. Going back to the culvert would be walking into a trap. Tommy took point, leading the way through the trees in the other direction.

The leaves were moldy, and we kept to a crouch, careful of noise. We could hear the men in the woods behind us. The road was only a few hundred feet to our right, and a sentry was posted there. Bushwhacking, it was hard for me to judge how much ground we were covering, but after what seemed like about five hundred yards the trees began to thin out. We were traveling slightly uphill. Tommy signaled, and Nick and I stopped in our tracks, listening.

Tommy moved forward again cautiously. We followed, staying low. I had to admit it was an adventure, but I didn't think the boys realized we were playing for all the marbles.

Nick and I bellied down in the leaves next to Tommy, and we parted the branches warily. We were past a curve in the road; the guard was just out of sight.

The south wing of the campus was on the other side of the road, up a shallow slope.

We drew back under the trees to try to work out a plan.

They don't know where we are, Tommy insisted. And if they've already searched the main build-

ings, the safest place for us is somewhere they think is empty.

Better not to be caught in the open, Nick added.

They both looked at me.

"You guys know the footprint," I said. "I don't."

Tommy said, "Neither do they."

"Okay," I said. "That's an advantage. But they have to figure we're here, hiding, because of the car." They nodded. "What's this building just across the way?" I asked.

The dining hall, they told me. Shut down for vacation.

"Let's get inside," I said.

Tommy went first, scuttling out of the trees and across the road. He went to ground behind the rhododendrons along the foundation. Nick scampered after him, quick as a shadow, and I went last, feeling large and ungainly.

The ground-level gallery gave us cover as we crept to the doorway. We didn't see anyone keeping watch in the quad. I slipped inside, and the boys ducked past me. There was a corridor, and then we were in the dining hall itself.

It was a high-ceilinged room, two hundred feet long and forty feet tall. The north wall facing the quadrangle was all windows, and light flooded the space. We were completely exposed if anybody was looking for us there.

This was where they had the prom, and alumni dinners, Nicky explained. It was their public function room.

It was too damn public for me.

We got down on our hands and knees and crawled along the wall behind the tables, staying out of the middle of the room until we got to the kitchen doors. We scurried through them and stood up, breathing hard. My back felt tight. The boys grinned at each other like they'd gone and put one over on somebody. I wasn't convinced. "We're not out of the woods yet," I said.

They looked at me, sobering quickly.

It was an institutional kitchen with a stainless steel serving area and big Garland stoves behind the line. To the boys it was a foreign country. I grabbed a phone off the wall, but there was no dial tone. All the connections to the outside had been cut. Nick tried a switch, and the big fans over the stoves kicked in. He shut it off immediately, but we had electrical power.

I checked the pilots; they were all out. I looked up into the overhead hoods. There was a fire-suppressant system, and I found the alarm. It was hardwired. You couldn't turn it off unless you pulled the plug on the whole school. They hadn't done that, which left us an out. The alarm system was on a direct relay to the local fire department.

The boys opened the gas lines while I knelt before the stoves with a box of wooden matches, lighting the pilots. You had to hold your thumb on the manual safety until the thermostats registered a steady temperature. When the pilots were lit, I fired

up the ovens and turned on the cooktop burners. With the exhaust fans off, the stoves would heat up the kitchen and trigger the foam and the alarms. We could also burn the school down. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Don't try this at home, I thought.

Nick and Tommy thought it was cool, of course.

I tried to disabuse them. Extreme circumstances call for extreme measures, I said. We're trying to swim our way out of the toilet. But their eyes glowed. I didn't have the time to wonder what kind of monsters I might be creating.

We didn't stick around. Behind the kitchen were stairs that led down to a loading dock, and up to an office. We went up to the office and then up another flight to the top floor. It was an attic, long out of use, that ran the length of the building. The space was unfinished, and the trusses that held up the roof were exposed. There was a hexagonal cupola in the center of the roof. We climbed a ladder to the platform inside it.

The cupola had windows all around; from that height you could see halfway to Canada. I was more concerned with what was going on in the immediate neighborhood, directly beneath us.

The guy I'd figured to be calling the shots was standing out in the open, three stories below, talking on his cell phone. It was hard to tell at that distance, but from his abrupt body movements

he looked pretty steamed. The team in the woods obviously hadn't turned anything up, and my guess was that the operational window was closing.

"I think these guys have run out of road," I said to the boys. "They're about to fold their tents."

"We can't let them do that," Tommy said.

"Why not?"

"Because they're after Nick. They could just try again some other time."

I didn't have a ready answer for that.

"We could bait a trap," Nick said.

"With what?" I asked.

"With me."

"There's one guy down there, and five guys we know about around the perimeter," I said. "They might have left that goon out front, too, to keep an eye on my car, and probably there's at least one more we haven't seen yet—they have to guard their own vehicles, wherever they hid them."

"You think it's too many," Tommy said.

"I know damn well it's too many."

"But we only have to capture one," Nick said.

"Which one?" I asked him.

"That one." Nick indicated the man on the ground. "If he's their leader, he knows their plan."

"You gents are taking a little too much for granted," I said. "Even if we could lay our hands

on this guy, why would the others cut and run?"

"Because he's the brains behind the outfit," Nick said.

I smiled at that turn of phrase. "And we'd have his phone," Tommy said.

"Good point," I said, not that I was warming up to the idea much. I didn't want to put the kids at risk, and I didn't want to make them accomplices to violence, either.

"See, he's going into Leverett," Nick said. It was the first dormitory on the left, at a right angle to Founder's Hall. "That's probably where he's keeping the hostages." He looked at Tommy. "You think?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "What hostages? I thought you two were the only students here."

"We are," Tommy said. "But there's Quint, the groundskeeper, and Bob Shade, he's a janitor. Mrs. Burrage, the headmaster's secretary. The bursar, Mr. McGarrigle. Gargle, we call him."

"Oily Oliver," Nick added.

"The math master," Tommy explained.

"They were all still here yesterday," Nick said.

It put matters in a different light, as if things weren't sinister enough already. The dean was dead, and I doubted that the Chechens would leave anyone else alive when the time came to move out, whether they had Nicky or not. I was liking the situation less and less.

"We've got to rescue them if we can," Tommy said.

Easy for you to say, I almost told him, but I kept it to myself.

"How do we storm the barricades?" I asked them.

"We can go across the rooftops," Nick said, pointing out the route to me. He was flushed with excitement.

We climbed down out of the cupola and made our way to the south end of the attic. A dormer opened onto the catwalk that led to the next building. We started across it. The quad was a rectangle, bounded by Founder's Hall at the south end and the dining hall at the other. The three dormitories on either side were connected by fire escapes.

I gave the boys a boost up onto the roof and hauled myself up after them. It was a gambrel and the upper pitch wasn't steep, but the boys had sneakers on and I was wearing street shoes. The roofing was slate, which made for slippery footing. I took my shoes off, tied them together by their laces, and danced along the ridge in my socks, holding my arms out for balance, my shoes in one hand. I tried not to look down. At the far end we lowered ourselves onto the fire escape, crossed to the middle building, and got on the roof. We made the same progress and dropped down onto the fire escape between the second and third dorms. I put my shoes on again.

"Well, what's the drill?" I asked Nick and Tommy.

My two generals looked slightly at a loss.

"I'll put it this way," I said. "My

guess is we're better off inside the building than out."

They described the setup. The second and third floors were student rooms, the first floor was the master's quarters and a common room. There was a center stairwell, which was the only way up or down; once we were on the ground floor we'd have to improvise. It wasn't much of a plan.

We stepped through the fire door into the third floor and crept along the corridor to the head of the stairs. Just across the hall was the bathroom, shower stalls and toilets.

Tommy tugged at my sleeve. "I have to pee," he told me in an urgent whisper.

"Okay, but don't flush," I said.

He grinned and ducked into the bathroom. Almost as soon as I'd said it, it gave me an idea, and when Tommy came back, I explained what I had in mind.

It was simple enough really. It might even work.

Tommy wasn't wearing a watch. I handed him mine. "Give us five minutes," I said, holding up that many fingers.

He nodded gravely.

Nick and I tiptoed down the stairs Indian file, keeping to the inside of the treads against the wall so there was less chance of their squeaking. We paused at the landing and listened, but we didn't hear anything. We went down the next half-flight and stopped at the second floor. The only sound was our own breathing. We moved out again, still cautious of noise, and halted at

the last landing, above the first floor entry. We peeked around the newel post into the lobby. It was empty.

Nick touched my arm.

I'd heard it, too, a man's voice, clipped and impatient but muted. A pause. Then something else. Another pause. An angry negative. He was talking on the phone, but I couldn't tell if he was speaking English. Nick and I retreated up the stairs to the second floor. It had the same layout as the floor above us.

Nick went across the hallway to the bathroom. I drew back around the corner, out of sight of the stairwell.

Tommy started flushing the toilets on the third floor. In the unoccupied building the noise of water rushing in the drains was just loud enough to be noticed. Nick began doing the same thing in the second floor bathroom. I heard feet on the stairs and took out the .40 Smith.

Nick appeared in the doorway of the bathroom and froze. He knew enough not to glance in my direction. Then he backed slowly away from the door, hands at his sides.

The feet on the stairs hurried the rest of the way up, and the guy stepped into the corridor, his attention on Nick. "Nikolai Saroyan," he said, sounding satisfied.

I screwed my gun into the guy's ear. "Not a peep out of you," I murmured.

It was the guy in the sweats and the windbreaker. He'd taken

off his watch cap. The machine pistol dangled from his left shoulder, and I relieved him of it. I took a step back, and he looked at me warily. There was a vaguely Asiatic cast to his features.

Another voice called up the stairwell from the lobby below. When there was no answer, he started up the stairs.

I turned the guy in the sweats around, put his arm in a hammerlock, and pushed him in front of me with my gun at the base of his skull.

The guy below us reached the landing and looked up toward the head of the stairs where we were standing. I pitched the guy in the sweats down the staircase. They collided and went down together in a tangle of arms and legs, the guy underneath taken by surprise. I scooted down the stairs a couple of quick steps and craned my neck over the railing, both hands on the Smith, but nobody else was lying in wait for us in the lobby.

I put the gun on the two bandits trying to wrestle clear of each other on the landing, and they stopped thrashing around. I gestured to them to roll over, and they did.

Nick stood behind me on the stairs. I told him he could go get Tommy, and he ran up to the third floor.

I went down to the landing, nudged the guy in the sweats out of the way, and frisked the other guy for a weapon and the cellular phone. I came up with both. I prodded them to their feet and

made them get facedown on the floor again in the lobby, their legs spread, hands behind their heads and their fingers laced.

Nick and Tommy came racing down the stairs. "Check out the windows," I told them. "See if we've got company."

They reported nobody in sight.

I could hear sirens in the distance now, getting closer to the campus, so the kitchen alarms had gone off and maybe the other Chechens had panicked. I got through to 911 on the cell phone and called for reinforcements just in case.

The hostages, faculty and custodial staff, were tied up in the common room of the dormitory, shaken but alive. Tommy and Nick cut them loose.

We stayed fortified up until the state police got there.

It took a while to sort things out. The investigating officers thought I'd shown a certain lack of judgment, to get the boys involved. I didn't argue the point.

I caught hell from the fire chief, too.

We showed up at the courthouse Monday morning for the custody hearing, me and Tommy and Nick. The acting dean of students had granted special dispensation, on my parole, and the three of us had spent the rest of the weekend together.

Tommy introduced Nick to his mother, proudly, but he was hostile toward his dad. I could understand that, but I felt a little sorry for Frank Macafy. Besides, he looked somewhat the worse for wear, like he'd had an encounter with a cement mixer and come off second-best. I wondered if Frank had gone to see his ex-wife after he'd left me and Tommy. The muscle Duke Skinner had hired to protect Irene would have made Frank see the error of his ways.

"Tommy's father fall off the back of a moving truck?" I asked Duke.

"He sort of threw himself under the wheels," Duke said.

I nodded.

"How about you?" Duke asked. "Any problems?"

I glanced over at Tommy and Nick. "We played a little hide-and-seek," I said, smiling.

Duke grinned. "The kid run you ragged?" he asked.

"I'd call it a draw," I said.

"By the way, what's this I hear about some fracas up at the school? It sounded halfway serious."

"We came out ahead," I told him.

"You must have done better than that," Duke commented. "You and those boys act like you just took the Series in four straight games."

I shrugged. "We had the home team advantage."

WHAT ARE THE ODDS



Wendy Leeds

When you got right down to it, my late husband Murray was worth more dead than alive. Folks warned me I'd be sorry if I married a no-good gambler like Murray. But the first time I laid eyes on him over at Feeney's Bar, I

felt the universe speak to me, which it does from time to time, and it said he was my destiny. Folks said if I married him I'd probably end up eating dogfood, but no one said anything about my winding up a widow, which I did.

Murray died playing poker in the back room of the China Crown restaurant, the biggest, fanciest place in the city, and the biggest game Murray played in. The guys who played the Crown were mostly uptown; they had big offices and names you could read in the financial section of the paper, if you got a paper. Murray and the owner of the place, Johnny Tyronne, had smoked and played cards together in gym class at P.S. 108. But fate had dealt them different hands as grownups.

Johnny turned out to be lucky at cards, Murray turned out to be lucky at love. Johnny had himself a lucrative chain of restaurants, a racehorse named Cinch Hand, and a Cadillac with gold hubcaps. Murray had me and the Four Leaf Clover Pawn & Play, which we owned together. I ran the pawnshop at a profit because I have a head for numbers. Murray ran his nightly poker game in the back room at a loss because he never had any luck at cards. He also had an unshakable belief that his big score was just around the corner. Which is why he played in Johnny's game at the China Crown for stakes he couldn't afford. It turned out the universe didn't listen much to Murray either.

Near the end of the game that night, Johnny Tyronne accused Murray of cheating and refused to let him collect the pot he'd just won. They said Murray got so mad his heart just exploded and he fell down over the table like

he was throwing himself in the pot.

At Murray's funeral Johnny Tyronne came up to me to say he was sorry my husband had passed on but, dead or alive, Murray still owed him twenty-two thousand dollars. When he produced the signed markers to prove it, I knew I was on the hook for every penny because nobody stiffed Johnny Tyronne and lived to tell about it.

Then Johnny took off his square-rimmed glasses to get a good look at me. He smiled and said I'd always looked good in black, and that he'd be willing to assume part ownership in the Four Leaf in place of the cash. I told him it was all I had left in the world and it wasn't for sale. He said because Murray and he went way back he'd give me three months to come up with the money. Then he tried to look down the front of my little black dress. I gave him a gentle whack upside his head and told him I wasn't that kind of girl. He told me if I didn't come up with his dough I was going to be that kind of girl whether I wanted to or not.

After they finished putting Murray in the ground, I went home and sold all his things and all my jewelry except the little gold four leaf clover pin Murray had bought me for luck. I figured I needed all the luck I could get because I didn't have a clue how I was going to come up with the rest of the twenty-two thousand dollars. So I put the thought out

to the universe that I needed a way to make some extra money and still keep my manicure nice.

The very next week Agnes DeFazio came in to pawn her boyfriend's guitar, which, along with a telephone bill and a bad cold, was the only thing he'd left behind when he ran off with a younger, thinner edition of her big redheaded self. Agnes figured the guitar would just about cover the phone bill, which left the bad cold unaccounted for but she said life owed her one. We got to talking about the way the universe seemed to be ignoring us, and when she heard my back room was empty, she suggested what our neighborhood really needed was a fortune teller. She said she had a contact with the infinite beyond and a way with cards, all she needed was the place, and I had that.

By the end of the afternoon we were drinking strawberry daiquiris like old friends and had decided to go into business together. Agnes DeFazio, a.k.a. Lady Fortuna, said she'd give me fifty percent of the reading fee, and I told her she could keep her tips. We figured if things worked out she could maybe buy into the business.

But things didn't work out. It turned out people in our neighborhood didn't need to pay to know their futures, all they had to do was look at their parents to know what lay ahead of them. So Agnes and I spent lot of afternoons playing gin rummy while I worried about my own future,

which wasn't looking too rosy what with Johnny Tyronne sending me little notes to remind me what my destiny would be if I didn't pay up and Agnes talking about the death card she kept seeing in my future.

Then one afternoon Johnny and a friend with a big neck and a bad toupee showed up at the shop. I asked him if he wanted to pawn something; he said no, he and his friend LeRoy were there to collect his money or else. I said I was still working on it and asked for more time to come up with the rest.

Agnes came out of the back room to see what was going on, and Johnny took his glasses off to get a look at her neckline. He put his glasses right back on and told me he wasn't in a mood to argue. I owed what I owed and would pay, one way or the other. While I was giving my options one more run-through, Agnes spoke up. "Why don't you play poker for it?" she suggested. "Seems to me that's the best way to settle things."

Johnny gave that some thought while LeRoy rubbed his knuckles together like he was sharpening them for immediate use. It sounded like a good idea to me except that I didn't know how to play poker. But then I figured learning poker was a lot easier than doing the tango with LeRoy, so I said let's do it.

Johnny didn't look too impressed with the idea. "What're you going to use as ante?" he asked.

"The deed to the Four Leaf Clover," I said. "You front me fair market value for the place in cash. If I lose, you get the place. If I win, I'll pay you off. Either way you come out ahead."

"You got a deal." Johnny smiled just wide enough to show his fangs. We shook hands on the deal, and he said the future was looking mighty fine. That's when I realized karma is in the eye of the beholder.

There was a big-busted woman guarding the desk at the China Crown. She had a wide bubble of black hair and was encased in a red dress that made her look like a middle-aged valentine.

"I'm Brandy, your hostess for the evening." She gave me a long, measuring look full of pure female dislike, then ushered me into a big room with red velvet wallpaper, a full bar along the far wall, and a long buffet table with a large ice swan sitting in the middle.

The minute he saw me Johnny put down his drink and came right over to say hello, I looked great, and did I bring the deed.

Brandy said she thought *he* looked great and brushed a piece of lint off his lapel with a lingering circular motion. I didn't think great was the word I would have used, but after Murray no man looked that great to me.

Johnny was wearing a tux and a pair of rose-colored glasses and had his good friend LeRoy stuck so close to his hip he looked like he had an extra body part. There

were five other men in formal dress all sitting around the table either smoking, talking, eating, or drinking, or some combination of those things. They all looked up when we came in, then went right back to what they were doing.

After I showed him the deed, Johnny introduced me around, and the men all stood up to meet me. He told me their names, but the only one I remembered was Big Al because Big Al wasn't big and that made me laugh. He was a short man with a big mustache, and Johnny said he owned the entire lower west side of the city. Big Al invited me to sit beside him and ordered a me a beer, which Brandy banged down on the table in front of me with a real bad attitude.

Johnny sat on my other side and asked me if I was ready. I said, "Ready as ever," which I was. Agnes had taught me everything I needed to know about poker, and we'd spent afternoons playing poker in our back room. She said her contact on the alternate side of the universe said to wear something of Murray's for luck, which I was going to need because that death card kept coming up in my future. So I had on my four leaf clover and was in constant communication with the universe about not dying.

When Johnny dealt the cards, I picked them up just like Murray used to. I had a pair of nines, but I pretended I had a royal flush just like Murray used to. I looked around the table and saw

everyone else was pretending they had royal flushes, too. Every time the bet came to me I upped the ante, just like Murray used to. And I lost, just like Murray used to. I gave the four leaf clover a little rub for luck, then remembered what kind of luck Murray'd had and left it alone.

As we played, Brandy walked around the table serving liquor or food with a little stooping gesture that made everyone else in the room stop for a minute and consider her majestic possibilities. I figured maybe part of her job was to distract the gentlemen from their cards, which she seemed to do okay for a woman of her age. But from time to time she brushed the bulk of her majestic possibilities against Johnny, and it didn't seem to distract him too much.

He kept right on talking, and I kept losing until it got hard to keep up my usual optimistic way of thinking. I began to wonder what it would be like to lose the shop, which was the only thing I had left of Murray. And it was clear Johnny was beginning to think about what it was going to be like to win.

"It looks like I'm going to be able to open a new restaurant sooner than I thought," he said as I laid down my pair of sevens and he scooped up his winnings. "I've been after the land under that shop of yours for a decade. It's the perfect location for an up-scale operation like the China Crown, but Murray said he'd rather die than sell it to me. And

now you're going to just hand it over." He shuffled the cards and dealt another hand. "This looks like my lucky day."

"You've got to beat me first." I put out to the universe that I get four aces, but it sent me a trio of twos and a nervous stomach. Things weren't going like I'd hoped. Truth was, I was beginning to doubt Agnes's connection to the infinite and the power of Murray's four leaf clover. I was even beginning to think maybe the universe had steered me wrong, when Murray himself rose right out of the red carpet.

Of course it wasn't Murray exactly, it was what was left of him after his untimely demise. His skin was as white as paper, his eyes had faded to the color of weak tea, and he wasn't wearing his glasses. He looked different, and I realized that in our twelve years together I had never seen Murray without his glasses except when he was sleeping or doing his marital duty. I thought he looked better without them, but I didn't say so. In fact I was too surprised to say much of anything.

He was wearing a suit I didn't recognize and had a cigar jammed in the corner of his mouth, just for show. He didn't smell the same as I'd remembered. Alive he'd smelled mostly like cigar smoke, dead he smelled like mildew and unwashed feet. That smell reached me right across the room and made me want to hold my nose,

which I didn't because I was holding my cards.

"For heaven's sake," I said out loud, which made everyone in the game check their cards again to review their bets. But no one else seemed to be able to see or smell my late husband.

"They can't see me or hear me," Murray said. "Just you, that's the way it works."

For a minute I wondered if they'd cheated me at Jordan's Funeral Parlor and buried someone else in the wooden box I'd selected for Murray's final rest. But then he put his arm right through Johnny's oiled-down hair and Johnny didn't even notice, so I knew Murray wasn't himself but a spirit from the other side.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Johnny looked up from his cards. "I want to win," he said. "Are you in or not?"

"I came back because I have things to settle with Johnny Tyronne," Murray said. "I don't get to rest in peace until you get me some justice."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Bet." Johnny's nosed flared out, and he started tapping on his cards in annoyance.

"Bet." Murray lifted the unlit end of his cigar in a little salute and walked around the table to get a look at everyone else's cards. "I'm going to tell you what to play, and we're going to beat Johnny at his own game."

"But that's cheating," I said aloud, and everyone in the room

looked at me with their eyebrows stretched out of shape.

"Cheating schmeating," Murray said. "All the great poker players had a little extra help from the universe. Folks think Diamond Jim was all talent, when truth was, he just had help from beyond."

While Murray was talking, Brandy made a sucking sound of surprise and dropped her tray of martinis back on the bar. LeRoy got his knuckles ready in case they were needed. Johnny laid his cards on the table and lifted himself out of his chair at me. "Are you accusing me of cheating, honey?"

When I said I wasn't, he said if I didn't like the way he ran his game I could find somewhere else to lose my shirt. Then he said I was a loser just like my late husband, who was also a cheater.

I stood right up to defend Murray's honor, and Murray himself yelled at Johnny and swung his fist right through Johnny's nose and out the other side of his head. Johnny didn't seem to notice, but he pulled his jacket tighter around him and shivered like he'd caught a chill. Then he sat back down and said he ran an honest game, we could ask anybody about that, and who wanted to play some serious poker?

I could see he was still thinking about throwing me out because he checked his pocket to make sure he still had the deed to the Four Leaf Clover, which he did. Then he looked at his cards,

and that seemed to cheer him up. He motioned for LeRoy to put away his knuckles, told me to sit down, and ordered Brandy to bring everybody a drink, some of his good stuff this time. So Brandy brought us all whisky on the rocks, which I didn't bother with because I'm not a whisky kind of girl.

Murray told me I shouldn't say anything else until he told me to and I should watch Johnny and LeRoy because they were cheating. He said he'd always figured Johnny was a cheat, but he'd had to die to finally figure out how Johnny did it. He said when Johnny or LeRoy was dealing, the other would slump down in his chair and the dealer would give him a peek at important cards with a smooth, quick motion. Then the other would return the favor. That meant they knew the key cards in almost every hand and could make their bets accordingly.

Of course it looked like Murray and I had a pretty good system going for ourselves, too. All he had to do was walk around the table and tell me exactly what cards everyone was holding and what to bet. Which is what he did. But not right away because poker is a game of strategy and patience. Murray said it was like war and you had to defeat one enemy at a time. He didn't let me win every hand, he didn't want Johnny to be suspicious, but one by one we cleaned out our opponents from the game and added their chips to my pile.

Johnny didn't look too upset about watching me win some. He kept ordering rounds of his private stock of whisky for the table and saying how he felt lucky, which made Murray laugh. But the really funny thing was, after all those years of trying to get Murray to quit the game, I found out I'd been born to play poker—having a good head for numbers and the natural gift of looking better than anyone in the northern hemisphere in gold lamé. That night I felt like the universe was speaking to me, which of course it was, with Murray being dead and all. I found I really liked to win, and I didn't even mind losing too much because I knew I would get back to winning again. Who would have thought a girl like me would end up playing poker at Johnny Tyronne's and not even break a sweat? As they say, karma moves in mysterious ways.

Towards the end of the evening only Johnny, LeRoy, Big Al, and I were left at the table with Murray and Brandy circling among us. Everyone else was back to eating, drinking, or talking while they waited for us to finish. LeRoy was looking like he could use a good antacid, but Johnny whistled as he dealt the final hand.

I held my breath when I picked up my cards, one spade after another ending with the ace; a flush, which, I thought, fit exactly how I was feeling—flushed. Murray went around the table and said Big Al didn't even have

a pair so he'd probably fold and go drink seriously, which he did. He said LeRoy had a pair of sixes and might stay in a hand or two before he went and started drinking, which he did. He said Johnny had three kings and would probably go for broke, which he did. We started the bidding slowly, testing each other for resolve, which we both had, in spades.

As soon as it was just the two of us, *mano-a-womano*, everyone else came to watch. That's when Johnny's eye started to twitch a little like the pressure and the whisky were finally starting to get to him, but he kept drinking and sliding chips into the pot. I kept betting until I had the entire value of the Four Leaf Clover riding on this one hand. When Johnny ran out of cash, he threw in the keys to his Cadillac to even things up. Both his eyes were twitching, and his hand was shaking when he tossed the silver key ring into the pot. He said, "I call. What've you got?" and reached for his drink to steady his nerves, but he picked up my drink instead of his, which was empty.

I was too much of a lady to point it out, and besides, he looked like he needed it. He swung the bottom up and swallowed the whole thing, water, whisky, and all. As I laid my cards on the table to show him just what a loser he was, Brandy screamed and came running from the other side of the bar.

"What're you doing?" She

knocked my glass out of his hand and grabbed him by the lapels. "You drank her whisky," she said. "That was *her* glass, not yours. You've screwed it all up!"

Johnny made a snorting sound. "I always thought you were the dumbest broad that ever walked the earth. Now I got proof." Johnny took off his rose-colored glasses and blinked at her as if he was trying to focus on her and couldn't quite do it. "What the . . ." he said. Then he said something gentlemen never say in polite company, and that turned out to be his last word. He grabbed his chest and fell down over the table, dead.

"Look what you've done," Brandy said to me. "You've killed him."

"I'd say he killed himself," Murray said, "with some help from Brandy's whisky." Which she'd meant for me. "Seems to me I had the same kind of whisky the night I died," Murray said, as if he was getting a loud, clear message from the great beyond. "I guess when I told Johnny I'd rather die than let him have the Four Leaf, he took me at my word."

LeRoy went around the table and did some half-hearted thumping on Johnny's chest to see if he could get his heart started again, which he couldn't. I said someone should call the authorities, but no one seemed in any hurry to interrupt the moment with a member of law enforcement. I guess we were all thinking pretty much the same

thing, even though they couldn't hear what Murray'd said. They were poker players, they had to be thinking, what're the odds of this happening twice?

Big Al finally said the words out loud. "This stinks." He cut right to the heart of the matter. "One guy dies, it's an act of nature. Two guys die, it's an act of someone who's going to regret it."

We all looked at Brandy, who was looking confused. "It worked last time," she said in a high little voice. "I thought Johnny'd like it. I was going to spring it on him like a surprise."

She'd done that all right. There was still a look of astonishment frozen on Johnny's face, his eyes still wide with their last look at life. Then I heard a hissing sound, like steam coming out of a radiator, and when I looked around, Murray was slowly evaporating. He tilted his cigar at me and said, "I owe you, babe." I said I'd be around to collect, and he said he'd be waiting and to stay in touch, which of course I will.

The authorities were interested in the fact that Murray and Johnny had died in exactly the same way in exactly the same place. The D.A. called it suspicious and threatened to open an investigation, but the autopsy on Johnny was inconclusive and Big Al was the kind of gentleman with pull in places where pull

mattered and a sense of loyalty to his friends and business associates. So he put the whole thing to rest by having Brandy disappear and everyone else in the room develop a permanent case of amnesia. The authorities eventually gave up and went on to work on crimes against folks who had no pull, loyalty, or amnesia.

Now Big Al's a regular in the game Agnes and I run in back of the new Four Leaf Clover Steak House. It turns out Johnny was right, the location is perfect for an uptown operation like the China Crown. It also turns out it was love at first sight for Big Al and Agnes. He lent us the money to get started and brings his friends around every Friday night. They all like the way we girls run things, so Agnes and I make a good living. We run an honest game, open to honest folks with a buck or two to wager on the turn of a card. Agnes says her connection to the infinite sees matrimony in her future, which is good.

As for me, the universe has started returning my calls for a change. I have a gold Cadillac to match my hair, and Murray's four leaf clover for luck, which is pretty much good these days. I haven't heard from Murray since that night, but I like to think he's playing poker out there in the infinite beyond. If you see him before I do, tell him to save a seat for me.

5

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FICTION

8:22:17

DEAD AIR

John H. Dirckx



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 6/98

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It was still dark when Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn backed his car into the driveway, got out to close the garage door, and got back in for the twenty-five minute drive downtown to work. His headlights glinted on frost crystals in his and his neighbors' lawns as he rolled down the long, deserted street towards the interstate.

He switched on the radio and emitted his habitual snort of annoyance on learning that he had once again just missed the seven o'clock news by having a second cup of coffee.

"... with periods of light rain throughout the morning and early afternoon, clearing by evening. High today in the low fifties, low tonight twenty-five. You're listening to easy, breezy one-oh-three. Here's Bubble Darrell and the Diehards with 'You Can't Afford to Quit!'"

A boisterous, unintelligible chant devoid of redeeming social value flooded the car as Auburn started up the access ramp to the highway. Although the roar of the wind around the car smothered the music to a great extent, he didn't bother to turn up the volume.

But when the record ended and a period of dead silence ensued, he began tinkering with the radio in the intervals of dodging misguided missiles and squeezing around slow freights. The station seemed to have gone off the air. Like thousands of other listeners just getting up or getting dressed or driving to

work, Auburn found another station and thought no more about it.

He had no sooner arrived at headquarters and hung up his jacket than Lieutenant Savage, his immediate superior, called him in.

"We just got a report of a homicide at radio station WNOY. The victim is Shark Bristol, the deejay. Pull Fritz Dollinger out of morning report and get on over there. Kestrel's already on the way."

When they turned on the radio in Dollinger's cruiser, WNOY was back on the air, once again purveying inarticulate screaming to the accompaniment of unidentifiable percussion instruments.

The radio station was situated in a block of office buildings and apartments on a heavily traveled county road. There was literally nowhere to park except in the parking garage that was part of the complex. Kestrel, the police evidence technician, had left his van in a yellow-striped loading zone outside the entrance to the radio station. Dollinger found an empty slot on the second tier.

The scene inside the station was surprisingly tranquil. The front doors opened into a plush lobby, where a receptionist sat at a desk sipping coffee. Larger-than-life publicity photos of four WNOY "personalities" grinned fulsomely down from the walls. A speaker over the desk was playing the end of the record

they'd heard in the cruiser. "In there," said the receptionist, pointing with a hand that shook.

The only door leading out of the lobby opened into a narrow corridor. They found Kestrel already at work, shooting flash pictures in various directions from the doorway of a room whose door, labeled Studio A, showed evidence of having been broken open. They squeezed past Kestrel and peered around the shattered door frame.

The studio was a dingy, cluttered box without exterior windows and absolutely devoid of adornment except the accumulated rubbish of months and probably years. The air was heavy with the smell of stale smoke and unwashed clothes. One wall was occupied by a large, battle-scarred console with record turntables, tape players, much newer CD players, microphones, a small telephone switchboard, and a complicated array of switches and lights.

CD's, audiocassettes, and even a few vinyl records overflowed from racks, and loose sheets of paper lay everywhere. In defiance of a prominent sign saying NO FOOD OR DRINK ON CONSOLE, at least two dozen Styrofoam cups and flip-top cans stood in a row along its top ledge. A digital clock on the wall said 8:22:17 in red numerals.

Three swivel chairs with rubber tires were ranged in front of the console. Among them a gigantic hulk of a man lay flat on

his back on the floor. His bulbous face, framed in a tangle of tawny hair and beard, was the color of a ripe plum. Shark Bristol, the flamboyant disk jockey and vitriolic talk-show host, had taken his last cue.

Kestrel moved into the room with his case of equipment, and Auburn and Dollinger crowded in at his heels. "Have we got any story on this yet?" asked Auburn.

"Not much." Kestrel was somber, hawk-faced, morosely dedicated to his work. "He didn't come back on the air after a record ended. They looked in through there—" he pointed to a window above the console giving a view of a larger room packed with more electronic equipment—"and saw him on the floor."

"Who's they?"

"The other people who run the place, engineers or whatever. They're in the other studio right now, on the air. They broke the door in, found him dead, saw these marks on his neck." His voice trailed off as he moved in for closeup shots of the corpse.

Auburn looked around. Besides the door that had been broken in, the only other openings into the room were a four inch square aperture through which tightly packed cables passed between the studio and the control room and a heavy steel door probably leading outside.

"Don't touch it," said Kestrel, who had eyes in the back of his head.

"We weren't planning to," said

Dollinger. "Know what's on the other side?"

"Not yet. Why don't you go grill somebody who's got some answers?"

Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, arrived and joined Kestrel in Studio A, and Auburn and Dollinger went back to the lobby to interview the receptionist.

She was still sipping coffee, and it seemed to be doing something for her nerves. She was a willowy brunette with a heart-shaped face. Something told Auburn that her veneer of refinement was thinner than her makeup. He put her name, Janice Brunner, and other particulars on a three by five inch file card and tucked it away in his pocket. "What time did you come in this morning?" he asked her.

"About seven."

"So you were here when this happened?"

She swallowed something that went down harder than coffee. "Yes, I was."

"Were you particularly close to Bristol?"

"No," she said in a voice that had about the same effect on Auburn's ears that raw lime juice had on his tongue. "We didn't get along."

"Want to elaborate on that?"

"No." But almost immediately she added, "I thought he was a terribly trashy person, that's all."

Auburn got the feeling she thought that about a lot of people, including maybe African-

American homicide detectives who didn't wear ties.

"Why don't you just go over everything that happened here this morning, as you saw and heard it?"

In the background the speaker played on. A record ended, and an announcer gave the time, played a thirty second spot commercial, and introduced another record.

"Around five minutes past seven somebody called up about the seven o'clock weather report. Then a couple of minutes later my whole switchboard lit up at once with people calling in to say we were off the air." She indicated a compact phone set that occupied its own stand next to her desk, the twin of the one they'd seen in the studio. "The station has eight lines for when we do giveaways and for the talk shows."

"Who's answering the calls now?" asked Dollinger. At least half the lights on the phone set were flashing, but no rings were audible.

"Nobody. Mr. Hample, the manager, told me to shut off all the lines except the one into his office."

"And where's Mr. Hample now?"

"In Studio B with Mr. Spinell, the engineer. That was Mr. Hample you just heard on the air." She gave no sign of thinking either Hample or Spinell was trashy. "Mr. Spinell was just coming in when I started

getting all these calls, and I told him—”

“Coming in where?” asked Dollinger.

“Through there, the same way you came in. That’s the only door. Except the exits from the studios. I told him we seemed to be off the air—”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Auburn. “Didn’t you already know the station was off the air, before those calls came in?” He made a vague sweeping gesture to indicate the speaker.

“No. I didn’t have it turned on. So Mr. Spinell went back and banged on the door of Studio A—”

“Why did he do that?”

“I guess he thought Shark was asleep.”

“Did that ever happen before?”

“Him falling asleep on the air? Sure. He took pills to stay awake for his all-night talk show, and when they wore off, he could fall asleep in the middle of a sentence.”

“Okay, so Spinell banged on the door, and then what happened?”

“Nothing. He went on into the control room, which is right next door.”

“Did he try to open the door of the studio?”

“I don’t know. I was busy on the phone. He went into the control room to see if the transmitter was down, and after a couple of seconds he came out and said he could see Shark lying on the floor in the studio, not moving, as if he’d fallen off his chair.

There’s a little window there between—”

“We saw it. Was Spinell the one who broke down the door?”

“He and Mr. Hample together. Mr. Hample came in just as Mr. Spinell—”

“Came in through here?”

“Yes, and they both went and sort of kicked the door in. Then Mr. Hample came out here and told me Shark was dead, that somebody had strangled him, and that I should shut off the phone, and then he went back to his office and called the police.”

“Did you go into the studio after they broke in?”

“No.” She shuddered. “I did take a peek through the window from the control room, though.”

“Who else was here at the station this morning besides the people you’ve mentioned?”

“Nobody. The night engineer leaves before I get here.”

“So there wasn’t anybody here that you know of besides Bristol and yourself when he was murdered?”

“That’s right. That I know of. But he often had people in the studio with him when he was on the air. Whoever killed him must have gone out the back door.”

“Did you see Bristol or talk to him at all this morning?”

“No.”

Auburn took a turn around the lobby, stopping before each of the posters on the wall, spending the most time before the picture of the man Janice Brunner thought was trashy. “What kind

of people would he have in the studio with him?"

"Oh, different air talent. People he interviewed, bandleaders, recording stars, sometimes just friends. Last Halloween he had a person commit suicide in there on the air, with an overdose of heroin."

"I remember that," said Dollinger. "It was just a publicity stunt, right?"

"That's what they told everybody afterwards, but the woman was in Intensive Care for three days, and the station paid her hospital bill—over twenty thousand dollars."

If her jaw gets just a little looser, thought Auburn to himself, we may find out yet what happened between her and Bristol. "Did you see or hear anything unusual this morning, either before or after the station went dead?"

"No—just what I told you. I was here in the lobby, and the studios are soundproof."

"When do you think we might talk to Spinell and Hample?"

"Whenever Kenny Dexter gets here. He's the announcer they called in to take over for Shark."

Stamaty appeared in the lobby and beckoned to Auburn and Dollinger with a rubber-gloved finger. He was a big dark man with gold-rimmed glasses.

Things looked pretty much the same in Studio A except that the steel door was now propped open, letting in a steady draft of cold, damp air. Kestrel was nowhere in sight.

Stamaty squatted beside the body. "With that color you could almost think he was a coronary, except for this." He lifted Bristol's chin and beard and pointed to a livid crease encircling the dead man's massive neck. "Ligature strangulation. Whatever the killer used, it isn't here."

Kestrel came in from outside with a flashlight in his hand. "Any chance you've got a crowbar in the cruiser?" he asked.

"Any chance you've got a requisition?" asked Dollinger in return.

"Come out here with me for a minute."

A light drizzle was falling on the concrete walk outside the door, beyond which an unkempt field of weeds sloped gently downward to a patch of woods. Sodden masses of leaves and rubbish lay here and there in the gray half-light of a winter morning. About two yards from the door a massive steel grating covered a square drain in the pavement.

"There's something down there," said Kestrel. "Long, like a piece of rope but shiny. Plastic tubing, maybe. Take a look."

He held his flashlight out to Dollinger, but instead of taking it Dollinger knelt beside the grating and tried to lift it by brute force. He moved it about an inch. "The four of us can get that up," he said.

He was right, but Auburn felt the weight of that grating in the small of his back for the next two weeks.

From a sluggish stream of slimy dark water they fished up a security cable for a bicycle—twenty inches of multiple-stranded steel wire inside a clear plastic tube. At one end was a notched male fitting and at the other a cylinder-type combination lock with four disks numbered from zero to nine. There was no trace of corrosion or rust on the metal parts and no slime inside the plastic tube even though it was open at both ends.

Kestrel took it inside for a detailed examination. It fitted the marks on Bristol's neck perfectly. Looped in a single half-hitch and drawn tight, it would have held its grip mainly by friction between adjacent turns of the plastic. There were no fingerprints or other identifying marks on it. Kestrel wrote his initials and the date on the lock with a diamond pencil and stowed the cable away in his specimen case.

A man in a raincoat appeared briefly at the control room window, then moved to the window facing Studio B and gestured through it to somebody they couldn't see. Auburn stepped into the corridor in time to see him disappearing into the other studio. Almost immediately another man came out—a tall, wiry man with thinning hair and an angular, intelligent face. "Making any progress?" he asked.

"Some. Your name, sir?"

"Spinell. Frank Spinell."

"You're the engineer?"

"Day engineer, that's right."

He had a brisk, incisive way of talking and the gift of smiling with his eyes. At a glance Auburn took in the reddish mole in front of his left ear, the capable-looking, restless hands, and the military polish on his shoes.

"Is there somewhere we can talk for a couple of minutes?" asked Auburn. "I'd like to get a statement from you as soon as possible so you can get on with your work."

"Come back this way." He took Auburn to an office at the end of the corridor, switched on lights, moved things off chairs. It was a biggish room with an uncurtained frosted glass window, about half its floor space occupied by looseleaf binders, cardboard cartons, and racks of CD's and tapes. "This is the manager's office," said Spinell, "but he'll be tied up for a while. He called in a substitute announcer, and during records they'll have to work out a program for the rest of the day."

When invited to narrate the events of the morning, Spinell substantiated Janice Brunner's story to the last detail. He had been parking his car at approximately the time of the murder.

"Were you listening in the car when the station went off the air?"

Spinell laughed outright, a brief yap like the bark of a friendly dog. "Does a garbage collector collect garbage on his day off? I don't even know if the radio in my car works any more."

"What did you see when you broke in?"

"Bristol was out cold on the floor. It looked like he'd fallen off his chair. Hample used to be a volunteer fireman. He got down on his knees and had a good look and said it was too late for CPR. Then he found that mark on Bristol's neck."

"Did you notice anything in the room that might indicate what had happened, who had been there?"

"No, I hardly went in. I had to get the station back on the air."

"What exactly does the engineer at a radio station do?"

"He's just a glorified, underpaid electrician. And you know that final clause in your job description—'other duties as assigned'? Well, it's in my job description, too. Maintenance, security, housekeeping, advice to the lovelorn . . . But mainly my job is—come on out here again, it's easier to show you."

He led Auburn back to the control room. The master console there looked like something salvaged from a World War II submarine. The banks of electronic equipment behind it gave off a faint hum and palpable waves of heat. Thick square windows afforded a view of the two main studios, one on each side, and of two much smaller recording booths tucked behind the control room and now dark.

Kestrel and Stamaty were still working over the corpse in Studio A, enclosing Bristol's hands in plastic bags to preserve trace

evidence in case he had grappled with his assailant. At the console in Studio B, Kenny Dexter, the substitute announcer, was in a huddle with a man Auburn assumed was Hample, the station manager.

Quickly Spinell explained the layout of the control room. "A lot of the equipment in here is set up in duplicate so if we lose our signal we can switch over to the other unit immediately while we track down the glitch. When Jan told me we had dead air, I ran in here to switch over, but I could tell from these meters that we were transmitting a signal—it just wasn't carrying anything. Then I looked through there and saw why."

"Who operates all those controls inside the studio?"

"The broadcasters handle that themselves." He was staring hard into Studio A. "There's something I didn't notice before. The fader for the mike is down. See that row of controls that slide up and down? They set the gain for the mikes and CD players and turntables."

"They set the which?"

"The gain, the volume. The one on the extreme left is for the left-hand mike, the one Bristol would have been using. Somebody pushed it clear down after Bristol introduced that last number."

"Wouldn't Bristol do that himself when he started the CD player?"

"No. It's too hard to keep the gain steady if you use the fader

as an on-off switch. He'd just shut off the mike. And he did—you can see that the switch above the fader is in the off position."

"So what does all that mean?"

"You're asking me?" He squinted at the floor briefly, lost in thought. "I'd say it means that whoever killed Bristol shut down the gain on the studio mike so it wouldn't pick up any noise from inside the studio while the record was playing—or afterwards."

"But I thought you said the mike was shut off."

"I did. There's a clue for you, sergeant. The killer knew something about broadcasting. But not a lot."

Auburn moved toward the door. "Mind telling me what kind of terms you were on with Bristol?"

Again that brief yelp of laughter, amiable but cynical. "He put up with me somehow."

Spinell picked up a set of headphones and slipped them on, evidently not disposed to discuss the matter further.

Auburn went back into Studio A, where Kestrel and Stamaty were packing up. "Any prints on any of those controls?" he asked Kestrel.

"Nix. Smudges over smudges on top of smudges. Some of the dirt in here is old enough to vote."

"Did you check the underside of those faders?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I also drank my milk this morning and brushed my teeth."

"What about this door?"

"What about it?"

"How sure are you that it was really bolted when they broke in?"

"Pretty sure. They ripped two screws right out of the jamb."

"Where's Dollinger?"

"Out there somewhere looking for footprints in the foggy, foggy dew," said Stamaty. "We probably locked him out."

Auburn invited himself on a quick tour of the parts of the radio station he hadn't seen yet. On the opposite side of the corridor from the studios and the control room were a small kitchen, restrooms, and a utility room. He found Dollinger in the lobby talking to Janice Brunner. Now he was sipping coffee, too.

"Find anything outside?" Auburn asked.

"No sign which way the killer went. He could have gone across the back of the building to the parking garage, or he could have hiked through the weeds along Route 11 and hoped a wide load didn't shave off his elbow. Or, if he was somebody who belonged here, he could have come back inside through the front door like I just did."

Harry Hample, the station manager, appeared in the lobby. "Officers, I apologize for not being free earlier, but my sponsors don't like paying for dead air." He was a big, round man who looked like a college linebacker gone to seed. He had a well-kept beard, the florid coloring of a heavy drinker, and the tolerant smile of a man conscious of his

own superiority to just about everybody. "What do you need from me?"

In the office Hample recounted the same series of events that Auburn had already heard from Janice Brunner and Spinell.

"You're pretty confident he was dead when you went in?"

"No pulse, no respiratory effort, pupils dilated, skin blue. I used to be a paramedic. I didn't even bother to thump him."

"Yet he had been alive, on the air, four or five minutes earlier."

"About eight minutes. After that long you don't bring them back. Of course, I thought he'd had an MI—heart attack—until I saw the mark on his neck."

"How do you figure eight minutes?"

Hample was patiently wise. "That last CD cut he played runs three minutes and twenty-five seconds, and after that we were off the air for a little over four minutes. The killer must have jumped him the instant he started the cut. You couldn't finish off an old water buffalo like Bristol in half a minute."

"Did you see anything else that could help us here? Any sign that anybody else had been in that studio that morning?"

"Nope. Just Bristol lying there dead."

"Is it normal to bolt the door of a studio when you're on the air?"

"With Bristol it was. He used to have some pretty shady folks in there with him at times."

"On the air with him?"

"Yes. People the police were

looking for; people the media were down on . . ."

"People who came and went by that steel door to the outside?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"Do we have any way of finding out who might have been in there with him last night—on the air or otherwise?"

Hample mused. "Carl Hengst might know—the night engineer. He leaves about six thirty."

"Does that mean there's no engineer here for half an hour every morning?"

"Right. The engineers are just for backup. Any broadcaster worth his salt can do most of what they do—they just can't very well do it and broadcast at the same time. Hengst sleeps most of the night. He's a high school teacher in Wilmot."

"I'll need to get in touch with him. First I'd like to find out a little more about Bristol and his relations with people here at the station. I assume your function as manager is to run the business side of the operation?"

Hample nodded a little pompously and ran a finger through his beard. "I sell air time, pay the bills, schedule the talent. I'm the closest thing to a program director this station ever had. Which means I'm the station's artistic and social conscience, if you will, and that makes me your number one suspect."

"How's that?"

"Because Shark Bristol was poison." Hample leaned forward in his chair and gripped the edge of the desk with hands like

claws. "He was irreverent, abrasive, abusive, obscene. He was a muckraker, a reactionary, and a blackmailer."

"A blackmailer in what sense?"

"Not in the legal sense, maybe. Not for money. God knows he didn't need any more of that. But he liked to find a person's weak point and play on it, make them crawl to him. He did it on the air constantly with callers."

"Yet he seems to have had a huge following."

"You put your finger right on it. He's the kind of air talent that people love to hate. They loathed him, they cursed him, they complained to the FCC about him—but they kept on tuning in. His all-night talk show, Bristol Channel, grabbed about eighty-five percent of the nighttime audience in our listening area."

"I think you hinted he had some connection with known criminals—underworld figures?"

"Right. The dregs of society. There was nothing straight about the man. Some of the material on his afternoon talk show was broadcast on a one-day delay so he could edit out anything he didn't like and insert additional insults and lies and retorts that he didn't happen to think of at the time of the call."

"Do you know of any particular enemies, any threats?"

"Enemies? Just the FBI, the CIA, Aridar Corporation, the postmaster general—"

"Why the postmaster general?"

"You haven't heard about

that? Bristol had it in for the Postal Service. He claimed he had over a million people all through this part of the country who for months had been saving up all the reply-paid envelopes they got in direct-mail advertising. Maybe for years. He threatened to have them stuff the mailboxes on a certain day with millions of prepaid business reply envelopes containing scraps of newspaper if the Postal Service didn't freeze the domestic letter rate and do away with the bulk rate."

"Do you know how serious all that was? Did it really get some reaction from the postal authorities?"

"Not unless they hired somebody to come in here this morning and strangle him. But he sure heard from Aridar, and so did I. Bristol started a rumor that all their photocopying machines make a duplicate of every image they print, on a hidden roll of microfilm that can only be removed intact by an authorized technician. He also claimed the FBI was harassing him about another rumor he started, to the effect that you can tell a person's race by applying a formula to certain parts of their Social Security number."

"He seems to have had a genius for opening cans of worms. I would have thought he was more of a liability to the station than he was worth."

"Exactly, and that's why I'm your prime suspect. I couldn't fire him because he was one of

the founders of the station and owned about twenty percent of the stock."

"I assume you're not actually saying you killed him?"

"You assume right."

"Do you have a key to that steel door?"

"We ought to. Bristol was the only one who ever used it. There's a door just like it in Studio B. They were never meant to be entrances to the studios—just something required by the Building Code, I think." He rooted in the drawers of his desk and almost immediately produced the desired article, labeled with a metal tag.

Kestrel and Stamaty had left, and Dollinger was standing guard over the body pending its removal. Hample waited in the corridor outside Studio A while Auburn tried the key in the outside door and found that it worked.

"Any idea if there are duplicates of this key around?"

"Sorry—I just don't know. There shouldn't be, but I guess somebody could have had a copy of that one made."

"Or used this one."

"Or used that one. Brings it kind of close to home."

Auburn nodded. "It does. Either Bristol let his killer in through the outside door, or somebody associated with the station let himself in with a key. Either way, it was somebody he knew. Very few people are murdered by perfect strangers."

"Well, you know where I was."

"Do I?"

"Sure. Like I told you, the station went dead about the time I came off the interstate. Bristol must already have been dead by then."

"But how do I know you were just pulling off the interstate when the station went dead?"

"I guess you don't, except—wait a minute. My ticket from the parking garage shows what time I came in. You've seen how it is out there. I sure didn't leave my car parked along the side of the road while I ran in here and killed Bristol because there isn't any side of the road. If you even slow down out there, you end up as somebody's hood ornament."

"Now I see why you didn't mind telling me you had reasons for killing Bristol. Got that ticket handy?"

"It's in my car above the visor. Here are the keys."

"Let's walk out together."

Rumors of what had happened at the studio had already leaked out, and Janice Brunner was entertaining two reporters in the lobby. Auburn and Hample slipped out of Studio A by the steel door and walked around the back of the building to the parking garage. It had stopped raining, but the ground was slippery with mud.

"By the way," said Hample, "Kenny Dexter didn't kill him, either. Ten minutes after Bristol died, I called Kenny at home and got him, and he lives in Wilmot."

According to his ticket, Hample had entered the parking

garage at seven eleven A.M. Auburn checked the clock on the ticket dispenser and found it agreed with his own watch within a minute.

When they got back inside, they found Spinell talking to Dollinger in the corridor. Even though the door to the lobby was closed, they could hear Kenny Dexter giving the ten o'clock news on the speaker. He didn't mention the murder.

"Now you've got to make another trip to the garage," Hample told Auburn. "Spinell was already here when I got in."

But Spinell had his ticket in his wallet. It showed that he'd checked into the garage at seven oh-eight.

Auburn found Dollinger hovering over the body in Studio A. "Come out here in the hall a minute," Auburn said. "Those microphones make me nervous. It looks like these two are both in the clear. Better see what the receptionist's parking ticket says. Of course she admits she was here at the time of the murder, and I don't think she's strangled anybody lately with nails like that, but—"

"Could be fake," said Dollinger. "They stick 'em on with cement. You break one, you stick another one on."

"Sounds like something you'd better check into very carefully, Fritz. I'm going to talk to the night engineer. He's the best prospect we've got left."

"Where's he?"

"At his other job. While I'm

gone, you might get a statement from Dexter. If he ever comes up for air."

From Hample, Auburn got the address of the school where Hengst taught science. "And I'll take it as a personal favor, Mr. Hample," he remarked, "if you don't call him and tell him I'm coming."

As he was leaving the parking garage, an ancient gray hearse with a rusted-out muffler arrived to remove Shark Bristol's body to the morgue.

Auburn reported in to headquarters on the car radio and was told that Lieutenant Savage needed to talk to him. "They got phone trouble over there, Cy?" asked Savage when he came on the air.

"They shut off the incoming calls. Been trying to reach me?"

"Some kid called in a while ago. Says he has a tape recording of the—uh—critical time on the radio this morning. I don't want to put it on the air. Find a phone and call in, and they'll give you his name and address."

Dale Gress was a pasty-faced youth with an oversized head, a stumbling gait, and a lisp. He welcomed Auburn to a loft over the garage behind his house, where he apparently lived in a fantasy world of science fiction posters, stereos, computers, video games, and other electronic gadgets. He said he was fifteen, and Auburn wondered vaguely why he wasn't in school.

"My father says I ought to sell

this to one of the news services," said Dale, "but I told him dead silence wouldn't bring a very good price, considering the state the economy is in right now." He essayed a cynical snicker. "But I thought you might be able to pick up something from what happened before the silence."

When he turned on the tape player, Auburn heard, through a crackling hi-fi speaker, the news broadcast he'd missed at seven A.M., the weather forecast he'd heard most of, and Bristol's last broadcast words—his introduction of the record. At Auburn's request, Dale fast-forwarded through most of the music. Then the tape went silent. Auburn strained to hear anything above the hiss of the equipment, but as Dale had already ascertained, there was nothing to hear. After more than four minutes of silence, Hample's voice came on the air, suavely apologizing for the break in transmission and introducing another record.

"Could I have a copy of this part of your tape?"

"You've got it. That's a copy I already made for you. It starts about twenty minutes before the murder."

"What makes you think there was a murder?"

"Heard it on the cable news channel. Of course, they didn't say murder . . ."

"How'd you happen to tape this in the first place?"

"I tape Bristol every night because my father won't let me stay up and listen to him."

At the high school in Wilmot, Auburn reported to the principal's office and was directed to a large room with skylights where Carl Hengst was supervising a laboratory session on magnets. He took Auburn into an office from where he could keep an eye on the class.

A rumbling, lumbering bear of a man just verging on middle age, he was wearing a tweed suit that hadn't had a crease in it for weeks. His manner was earnest, but he gave no sign of being uneasy when Auburn showed identification. On the other hand his expression of surprise on hearing of Bristol's murder was, Auburn thought, somewhat overdone. Maybe Hample or Spinell or Janice had called him. Or maybe he had been watching the cable news channel that morning, too.

Hengst maintained that he had left the radio station at six thirty that morning as usual. To the best of his knowledge, Bristol had then been alone in Studio A, and for that matter in the whole suite occupied by the station: Hengst had been shaving and showering at home, eight miles from the station, at the time Bristol was murdered. He hadn't been listening to the station when it went dead. His wife couldn't confirm his alibi because she'd already left for work by the time he got home. He refused to speculate on who might have killed Bristol.

At eleven twenty-five Hengst stepped back into the lab briefly

to direct the students to put away their materials and prepare for dismissal. Once they had swarmed away to the cafeteria, he was free until one o'clock.

"Have you got an audio tape player around here?" asked Auburn.

"You're practically leaning on it."

"I'd like you to listen to this." He put in the cassette Dale Gress had given him, rewound it partway, and turned it on. This time Hengst's astonishment was genuine. He stood stock-still in the middle of the room staring in fascination at the tape player while the color drained out of his face and came back again in a rush. "Where did you find that?" he asked, when the period of silence began.

"How sure are you that what we just heard was live?"

Hengst looked blank. "Live in what sense?"

"I thought 'live' had a sort of technical meaning in broadcasting."

"Well, the trouble is, it doesn't. It's one of those words like 'genuine' or 'liberty.' Genuine cultured pearls. Liberty to do as you're told." He paused and drew a deep breath, and Auburn had the uncomfortable feeling he was about to hear a science lecture. He was right.

"Back in the early days of television," said Hengst, "most shows were broadcast live, and only a few were 'canned'—on movie film. Since everybody could tell

the difference, 'live' had a pretty obvious meaning. Then they improved the hardware so you couldn't tell the difference any more, and right away about ninety-nine percent of the programming was prerecorded—on film or tape.

"For a while the networks used to put on a slide that said 'live' when they did a Thanksgiving parade or a concert, or on-the-scene news coverage. But if the show was being taped, that slide went right onto the videotape, so when they reran it six months or a year later, it still said 'live.' Even if there wasn't a slide, the emcees or newscasters were still saying, 'We're coming to you live.'"

"One of the local TV stations has a slide that says 'live footage.' What is that supposed to mean? If you've got it on something you can measure by the foot, mister, it sure ain't live any more."

"I guess what I meant—"

"During the sixties the public started complaining that the canned laughter on TV sitcoms sounded too phony, and the comedians complained they couldn't get their timing right when they were taping on a sound stage without an audience. So the word 'live' started to mean 'recorded while being performed before a live audience.' The recording companies picked that up, and now they make a big deal about whether a performance of classical music is a 'live performance' or not. You ever

hear of a dead person performing anything?"

"Then I guess what I want to know about this tape is, was it recorded live?"

Hengst shook his head and indulged in a contemptuous smirk as if he had just found a student who didn't have a clue what last night's reading assignment was all about. "That reminds me of a guy who tried to tell me I couldn't tell the sound of an electronic organ from a pipe organ. And to prove it—get this now—to prove it, he was going to play me two records on a sterec." He snorted violently. "You put anything through an amplifier and a speaker system, and, mister, it's electronic. And it sure ain't live." He looked pointedly at the tape player. "A tape can't be live."

"Okay, forget 'live.' Let's say 'simultaneous.' Was Bristol actually talking when this recording was made from the radio?"

"Simultaneous won't work either." Hengst's frown betokened impatience, almost anger. Maybe he was just getting hungry. "Two things can't happen at the same time unless they happen at the same place." He paused for effect and stared at Auburn with gimlet eyes.

"That's either pretty profound, or—"

"It's not profound at all. It's basic twentieth century physics. Why don't you hear the thunder along with the lightning unless they're right on top of you?"

"Because—"

"Did you ever hear of a star

called Rigel? It's in the constellation of Orion, and it's five hundred light years away. What that means is that if you look up at Rigel tonight you'll be seeing light that's been traveling for five hundred years. The combustion of gases that generated that light took place about the time Columbus discovered America, but you're not going to see it happen until tonight. You still want to talk simultaneous?"

"Look, Mr. Hengst, I think you're putting me on. Just tell me this. Could somebody have tampered with this broadcast? Put a recording on the air of Bristol giving the weather and introducing that record, to create a wrong impression about the time of death?"

"They could, but I don't think they did. They'd have had to recover the tape and destroy it immediately after it went on the air. If they were in the studio to do that, it couldn't do them any good as an alibi. I'd still like to know where you got that tape."

Auburn had plenty to occupy his mind on the trip back to the radio station, particularly the growing conviction that if anybody ever deserved to be murdered Shark Bristol was that person. With so much hate in the air, all directed at one man, only one result was possible. But although Fate, or logic, or basic twentieth century physics might have demanded Bristol as a sacrifice, it was still Auburn's job to

identify the hand that had struck him down.

When he got to the station, he found half a dozen people in the lobby all talking at once to Hample, who was also talking. Janice Brunner was in the kitchen eating lunch, and Dollinger was eating lunch with her.

"I've got one more question for you," Auburn told her, ignoring Dollinger. "You said earlier that somebody called about a weather report?"

"Yes. Right after I came in, a man called up to say the weather report that Shark had just read was stale. That was the word he used."

"Meaning . . ."

"He said there was a revised forecast calling for—I don't know, a low pressure system or a thunderstorm or something." She gestured vaguely with a wedge of pizza.

"Do you get a lot of calls like that?"

She nodded while chewing. "Pretty many."

"Where do you get your weather reports?"

"Walter Windchill," she said with a coy grin. "That's what they call the National Weather Service. They just call up every hour or two and copy down the recorded message, and read that on the air."

"Got a minute, Fritz?" Dollinger sprang to attention and followed Auburn into the hall. "I'm going out to grab a bite," he said, trying not to scowl at the paper

napkin in Dollinger's hand. "Did you talk to Dexter yet?"

"Yes. He looks squeaky clean to me. Great alibi if it checks out—house full of relatives. Did you know Bristol was a millionaire?"

"Dexter tell you that?"

"Hample. And he's got no family. Like Hample said, lots of strings but no knots. Wonder if he had a will."

After lunch Auburn went back to see Dale Gress and spent another hour listening to segments of Bristol's last all-night talk show. It was nearly three P.M. when he got back to the radio station. He started up the curving driveway into the parking garage just in time to see a motorcyclist maneuver his bike adroitly around the end of the lowered gate and park it in a triangle of dead space at the end of the nearest row of cars.

Seeing Auburn's car coming up the ramp, the cyclist sprinted back to the gate, punched the button, and took a ticket. The gate had gone up and down again by the time Auburn reached it. The motorcyclist smiled, nodded, and went on his way as if he did this every day.

Maybe he did. And maybe as a rule he didn't take a ticket or pay the attendant at the far end of the garage when he left but slipped out the way he'd come in. Maybe—a honk behind him woke Auburn up to the fact that he still hadn't punched the button and received his own ticket. After pulling into a parking space he radioed Motor Vehicle Regis-

tration for some information, and then started off on foot on a hunting trip up and down the rows of cars in the garage.

The car he was looking for had an empty bicycle rack on the back. When he went into the lobby of the office building next to the radio station and used the public phone to call Kestrel, the pounding of his heart and the tightness in his chest weren't due entirely to his having just run down four flights of stairs. And after his conversation with Kestrel they only got worse. Things had fallen into place so suddenly and so neatly that he now had probable cause for a felony arrest without a warrant.

He let himself in by the back door of Studio A and sought out Dollinger for a short meeting. Janice Brunner had gone home for the day, and Hample was in Studio B with Dexter, probably arranging programming for the evening hours. Spinell was putting in the control room.

"Could you spare us five minutes, Mr. Spinell? For some serious talk?"

"Sure. Come on in."

"Maybe we ought to sit down in the office again for this."

Spinell accompanied them in brooding silence. Auburn waited until he and Dollinger were between Spinell and the office door. "Mr. Spinell, you're under arrest for the murder of Shark Bristol." As he went on to read him his rights, Spinell's chin jutted forward defiantly and his eyes grew dark with fear.

"I thought you decided that my parking ticket—"

"I know what you thought, sir, but some of us aren't as feeble-minded as we look." Auburn talked like that sometimes when he knew he had a case nailed up, down, and sideways. "Sit down. I'm going to explain how you did it. Feel free to interrupt."

Spinell lowered himself slowly into a chair, his muscles taut, his gaze fixed on Dollinger's squat bulk before the door.

"You came in earlier than usual this morning and parked on the top level. Maybe you watched from somewhere out of sight until Janice Brunner got here. Anyway, you knew she wouldn't go near Bristol."

"You waited outside the back door of Studio A until Bristol started the CD player. Maybe you were listening on a portable radio, or maybe you were able to time it that closely just by looking at your watch. As soon as Bristol shut off the mike in the studio, you went in—either with the key or by knocking and being admitted. You gave him some reason for coming in that way, maneuvered behind him, and garroted him with a bicycle cable. You pushed the microphone fader down—not to keep the sound of what you were doing off the air, because you knew the microphone was already turned off, but to make it look like the murderer was unfamiliar with the workings of the console."

"Then you left the way you'd come, disposing of the cable in

the storm drain outside the door. You ran around the back to the parking garage, waited until there were no cars approaching along the road, punched the button at the gate, and took a second ticket that seemed to show you'd driven in after Bristol was dead."

"Why would I kill him?" Spinell's voice was hoarse, an octave higher than normal.

"I suspect that, like some of the other folks around here, you had more than one good reason. You may have been planning this for weeks. You could easily have gotten possession of the key to the steel door, since as you told me your duties include security and housekeeping. What probably prompted you to act when you did was the crusade Bristol started this week on his all-night talk show—a campaign to revile and lampoon POW's. Your car has a FORMER POW license plate. Shark Bristol said you were all losers who didn't start fighting the war until it was over and now don't know how to stop."

"I told you I don't listen to the station when I'm not at work. And you can't prove I was in that studio when Bristol died."

"I can do better than that. Your car also has a bicycle rack on the back. Around one of the supporting struts you wrapped four yellow strips of plastic tape, side by side, each with a black numeral printed on it forming the number 3187. The odds are

ten thousand to one against any given four-digit number's being the combination for the lock on the cable that killed Bristol. The number on your bike rack unlocks it."

The defense collapsed.

That evening Auburn was back at the radio station clearing up a few details with a tired and harassed Hample when Carl Hengst came in, four hours early, to cover for Spinell. Auburn found an opportunity to talk to the night engineer privately.

"I want to give you some advice, Mr. Hengst, and I hope you won't take it wrong. There's such a thing as supplying too many answers when you're questioned by the authorities." Hengst, looking both older and less imposing out of his worn tweeds, was listening with arched eyebrows. "Next time you want to deliver a lecture on the physics, or philosophy, of time, don't try it out on somebody who's getting paid to suspect you of murder. You almost had me convinced you'd done something tricky with a tape recorder."

"Well, that's just the opposite of what I had in mind. I was only trying to muddy the waters a little because I couldn't prove where I was at the time Bristol was killed. And, mister, I had a much better reason to kill him than Frank Spinell did."

"Really? How's that?"

"I think I'll take your advice and shut up while I'm ahead."

FICTION



HICKLEBICKLE ROCK

Sherry Decker

Cassie lay on the roof of a long-dead '48 Chevy fifty yards from the house watching her older brother sharpen his knife. Ben sat in the open front door of their house, his black-booted feet on the steps. He dragged his knife blade repeatedly across a square gray stone, and then he lifted the knife to eye level, squinted at the shining edge, and pressed the soft part of his thumb against it. Smiling, he slid the knife into a leather sheath on his belt and got to his feet. He disappeared into the black interior of the house.

Cassie rolled over on her stomach, relishing the warm car roof. It was just after eight o'clock on Saturday morning. By noon the metal roof would be a skillet and the inside of the car would be an oven even though Ben had shot out all the windows last summer. Blackberry vines covered the front end of the car right up to the missing windshield, and vines grew through rusted-out holes in the floor, coiling and looping and filling the front seat like pale green snakes with thorns. There was one corner in the back seat where Cassie sometimes crawled when she wanted to hide from Ben, when he was feeling mean and looking for someone to tease.

Sometimes Ben chewed his lower lip as if he were unaware of what he was doing. Sometimes he chewed his lip until it bled, and then he would lick the blood away with his tongue. Sometimes he drummed his fingers on his knees in time to a rhythm only he could hear. When Cassie saw him doing these things, she found a place to hide and stayed there until he gave up calling her name, until he leaped on his black and chrome Harley-Davidson and skidded out of the yard in a cloud of dust and flying rocks. His motorcycle rumbled like thunder. Even when Ben was a half mile away, the familiar growl of his bike was unmistakable.


Cassie slid from the car roof and ran across the front yard, down toward the mudflats. A big alder tree towered from a rise of ground in the strip of land between the dust of the driveway and the edge of the mud. She stepped behind the tree just as Ben jumped from the doorway to the yard.

"Cassie!" he yelled.

Cassie studied her bare feet, the way one foot sank into soft gray dust and the other into soft black mud. The mud oozed between her toes, curling over and touching the next curl of mud like wide, matching rings. She leaned against the tree's thick trunk.

"Cassie, come here, little *darlin'*." Ben's boots raked the scatter of loose rocks in the dirt at the bottom of the steps.

Cassie peeked around the tree trunk in time to see Ben stride across the yard to the Chevy. He stepped into the mass of berry vines and checked behind the car. "Cassie?" He walked back around to the half-open door and stuck his head inside the car. "Cassie!" Then he



turned around and scanned the yard with his pale blue eyes. He kicked rocks toward the bay. Cassie ducked back behind the tree.

"Dammit, brat. Where'd you go?" Ben kicked more rocks, and one of them ricocheted off a tree root. The rock arced high and landed in the mire, splattering thick black mud on Cassie's legs.

"Okay, fine!" Ben flung a leg across the seat of his motorcycle. "See if I care." A moment later the bike growled alive, and he roared out of the yard and down the road.

Cassie rounded the tree, keeping the trunk between herself and Ben. When he reached the blacktop at the end of the bay and turned left, she ran for the house.

It was dark inside. It took a half minute before her eyes adjusted to the shadows.

"That you, Cassie?" Her mother's voice was high and quivery. She always sounded that way after a late Friday night of waitressing at the tavern.

"Yes, Mama."

"Darlin', bring me a glass of water, please."

The sink was piled with dirty dishes from the past three days. Big green flies circled the room and crawled across the plates and bowls. The cupboard held one clean glass. Cassie used a chair to reach it, turned on the cold water, and let it run. Then she filled the glass and carried it to her mother.

Her mother was in a nearly upright position. She reached for the glass with both hands. "That's my girl," she said. Her hands shook. "Did Ben leave already?"

"Uh-huh."

"Dammit. I asked him to give you a ride into town. We need a few things from the store."

"That's okay. I can walk."

"The money's in my purse there. Take the twenty."

"What do you want me to get?"


"I'm about to die for some orange juice, baby. And you'd better get a loaf of bread . . . and here, I'll write a note for you so Mr. Cox can sell you a pint of Jim Beam."

"He won't do that any more, Mama, remember? He said not to ask again."

Her mother sighed. "Okay. Just the juice and the bread then. Take the ten instead of the twenty . . . and make sure Mr. Cox gives you a receipt. I'm pretty sure he overcharged you last time, but I couldn't argue without the receipt."

"Okay, Mama."

"Thanks, darlin'." Cassie's mother slipped back down into her bed and pulled the sheet over her shoulder. Her ash-blond head sank into the pillow.



Cassie paused in the bedroom doorway. Her mother was already asleep, snoring lightly, a similar rhythm to the circular droning of the flies in the next room. Cassie stuffed the ten dollar bill into her shorts pocket, found her faded red Keds near her bedroom door, jammed them on her feet, and ran outside.

It was a quarter mile from the house to where the dirt driveway merged with Bay Road. It was all blacktop from there into Bristleton. Cassie hurried along the edge of the blacktop, keeping close to the cat-tails and the cottonwoods on the other side of the narrow ditch. If she heard Ben's motorcycle, she knew of several places to duck and hide.

Across the road to Cassie's right were the mudflats of Bristleton Bay, a saltwater inlet too shallow for boats with deep hulls. At low tide only a narrow strip of water remained in the center, sloshing back and forth in a rocky trough. The bay's salty, iodine smell, the smells of dead, sunbaked fish and warm seaweed were a pungent mixture, something that made visitors to the area pinch their noses and hurry back to their cars. But Cassie found the smells comforting. She had come to like the smells.

Oftentimes her mother would reach out, ruffle Cassie's fine blonde hair, and ask, "What does the bay tell you today, baby? What kind of day will it be?" And Cassie would turn to gaze at the water. She'd study the way the sunlight glanced off the surface, she'd inhale slowly, through nose and mouth together, and close her eyes and let the smell leave a taste in the back of her throat. The bay had a way of warning her of trouble. "Nothing bad today, Mama. The breeze smells sweet."

"Sweet? If you say so, darlin'." Mama would shake her head and get that half-smiling look on her face, as if she thought reading the bay's mood was a strange thing to do. But she'd smile. "Maybe at high tide this evening, after the water has flooded back in over all that steaming mud and over those baked rocks, we can go for a swim."

"Okay, Mama."

On her journey to the grocery store Cassie approached an abandoned gas station that slouched on the outskirts of town. Its corroded gas pumps leaned away from the sinking building, its doors and windows were mostly boarded over. What remained of the original yellow paint hung bleached, blistered, and flaking away. More blackberry vines claimed the building as a trellis, pressing against the few visible windowpanes from inside like long ghostly fingers. The wide garage doors were a collage of public notices, of upcoming events, bond issues, politicians' faded photographs atop their faded promises, and handprinted missing-dog and -cat signs. Cassie glanced at the hodgepodge of flyers, saw nothing new, and kept walking. But she halted at the next utility pole. A new flyer had been nailed to the post.

REWARD, it began, FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE WHEREABOUTS

OF LUCY ANN HARSTEAD, AGE 16—MISSING SINCE JUNE 10—LAST SEEN WEARING BLUE SUNDRESS & WHITE SANDALS. ALL INFORMATION KEPT CONFIDENTIAL.

A black and white photograph took up the top half of the flyer, and Cassie studied the photo closely. Lucy Ann Harstead looked familiar. Cassie decided she'd probably seen the missing girl in town, loitering around the drugstore or the grocery store with the other high school girls, reading celebrity magazines, drinking cans of soda pop, and comparing shades of fingernail polish. She could ask Ben if he knew her. He was seventeen, closer to Lucy Ann's age. Naw. Cassie didn't want to ask Ben anything. He'd either tell a whopping big lie or refuse to talk at all.

Once, a couple of years ago, Ben had told her he knew where there was a nest of baby ducks. "Cute little yellow ducks, and they'll eat right out of your hand," he'd said. Cassie had followed him along the shore until they were nearly a mile from home. Then he pulled a length of cord from his jacket and tied her to an alder.

"That should give you something to do for awhile." Ben grinned, turned, and jogged away on the trail alongside the bay.

At first Cassie yelled, and then she wrestled with the rope, twisting and pulling and gasping, but soon she grew dizzy. For a few seconds she couldn't see—everything went white. She felt as if she were floating, as if only the cord kept her from floating away. And then finally she focused, saw the grass at her feet and the sunlight sparkling on the bay, felt her equilibrium return. Her eyes stung and then blurred. She was glad Ben wasn't there to see her crying.

Hours later when she had nearly worked herself free and her wrists were raw and she'd wet her pants twice, suddenly Ben was there again.

"I thought you'd get loose by now, brat." He untied the rope. "Guess this last knot was pretty tight."

During the day the tide had come in. Cassie waded out far enough to rinse the urine from her feet and legs and to cool the stinging rope burns. Then she splashed water on her face to wash away any dried tears.

Cassie went on past the reward flyer for Lucy Ann Harstead. A few minutes later she pushed open the front door to Cox's Grocery and stepped inside. Mr. Cox was behind the front counter. His pink scalp reflected the overhead lights through his thin, straight, graying-blond hair. He looked up, nodded at Cassie, and then returned his attention to a customer. The customer was stoop-shouldered and elderly and wore a straw hat. He turned at the sound of the bell above the door and squinted through thick lenses at Cassie as she picked up a shopping basket from the end of the counter. Then he continued talking.

"In my day we handled things differently, yessir. We'd have found

the sick so-and-so by now and given him a taste of his own medicine, *guaranteed.*"

Mr. Cox leaned across the counter. Cassie heard the sound of whispering, and then the customer turned and eyed her again as she passed by.

"Hmmm," the man said.

"Well, at least they found her," Mr. Cox shook his head. "Not knowing . . . that's got to be the worst part."

"I guess so. Say, how's your garden doing this year?"

"Back quarter-acre is all in bloom. Come and see it sometime," Mr. Cox said.

"I'd like to." The old man jerked his head toward the door. "Well, the missus is waiting for these groceries. She's making pies today."

"Take care now," Mr. Cox said.

The bell above the door jangled, and then, "Help you find something, Cassie?" Mr. Cox stood at the end of the aisle rubbing his bony white hands together. Cassie's mother had explained it was just a nervous habit he had.

"No, thanks. I know where everything is." Cassie picked up a can of frozen orange juice concentrate and dropped it in the basket.

"Did you hear about the Harstead girl?"

"I saw her picture on the telephone pole down the road." Cassie rounded the end of one aisle and headed up the next aisle.

"Neighbors said they heard a motorcycle the afternoon she disappeared," Mr. Cox said, continuing to rub his dry palms together.

Cassie shifted the basket to her other arm and lifted a loaf of whole wheat bread from the display. Mama and Ben both liked whole wheat bread.

Mr. Cox nodded, his eyes not really focused on her, more like he was thinking aloud. "Neighbors said they heard a motorcycle go up and down the road several times that afternoon."

Cassie slid the basket onto the counter. Mr. Cox arrived at the other side, picked up the orange juice concentrate, and punched the price into the cash register.

"Mama wants the receipt this time," Cassie said.

"Sure thing, little lady. What's your brother up to these days? Ben graduated from high school this month, didn't he?"

Cassie nodded. She remembered the day Ben came home from school, grabbing one of Mama's beers out of the refrigerator and saying how he felt like celebrating now that he had graduated, and how Mama shrugged and said, "If you can call a D average 'graduating.'"

"What do you know?" Ben fired back. "You're nothing but a drunk."

"Well, takes one to know one. I do believe that's the third beer you've taken without even asking."

"Well, you can have it back." Ben threw the can on the floor. Amber

beer and foam gushed across the dull wood. Then he had shoved past his mother and out the door.

"They found the poor Harstead girl, you know," Mr. Cox said. He placed the orange juice in the bottom of a small sack and the bread on top. He waved the receipt in the air above the sack, making a show of integrity before he dropped it in and folded the top of the sack.

"Is she okay?" Cassie asked.

"Okay? No, Cassie. She's dead. A search team found her over on Hicklebickle Rock, laid out like some kind of gift or decoration."

"Huh?"

"Whoever killed her laid her out sort of nicelike, over a hundred lilies spread all around her and both her hands folded over her chest like this—" Mr. Cox demonstrated—"holding a bouquet. She was fully dressed. Nothing wrong there. She hadn't been—you know—molested."

"What's 'molested'?"

Mr. Cox's eyes focused on Cassie as if only then realizing to whom he spoke. "Well, that wouldn't matter none to you." He handed the sack to Cassie. "There you go. I hope you and your friends don't ever play around Hicklebickle Rock. It might be dangerous."

"That's clear across the bay from our house. I can't swim that far."

Mr. Cox turned his gaze out the window, and Cassie's gaze followed his. From his store they had a clear view of Bristleton Bay. Cassie's house was a small beige square to the far right side, and straight across the bay on the left side was Hicklebickle Rock. The rock jutted up and out over the water like a giant's thumb with an unusual rock formation at its tip that looked like a kneeling Indian woman with a blanket over her shoulders. From this far away the kneeling Indian woman was just a small bump.

"Right," Mr. Cox said. "Even at low tide you couldn't wade clear across—not that you'd want to."

"No. Besides, Mama told me Hicklebickle Rock is haunted."

Mr. Cox smiled. "Well, there's a legend about some lost civilization—a displaced tribe of Aztecs, I think. Some people still believe it's a place of mysterious power. Last summer a visiting archaeologist from the state university said he was certain Hicklebickle Rock was once a place for human sacrifice—to some old Aztec god called Quetzalcoatl."

Cassie wrinkled her nose.

"Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that. Your mama might not want you knowing things like that—scary things to keep you awake nights. Guess I talk too much."

"It's okay. I won't tell her you told me."

"How old are you, Cassie?"

"I'll be nine when school starts."

“You’re small for your age, but you’re older than nine up here.” Mr. Cox tapped his temple. “You’re growing up fast. Hope you’re careful.”

Cassie wasn’t sure what Mr. Cox meant, but she nodded.

He came around the counter and opened the door for her. “Tell your mama I said hello.”

Cassie headed for home but paused when she reached the driveway. She set the grocery sack down in the shade of a maple tree. It was already hot and not even noon. She blotted her upper lip with her wrist and checked the bay’s mood.

The tide was out. The water in the center was flat and calm, the sun glinting off its surface the same way it reflected off Ben’s sharpened knife. Cassie sniffed. The air smelled bloated and heavy, the same way it had smelled the day after a killer whale carcass had washed in. *Danger*, it whispered.

When she got home, her mother was in the kitchen. Cassie was surprised to hear her whistling and to see her elbow-deep in steaming water and detergent bubbles. Most of the dishes were washed.

“Hey, baby,” her mother said.

Cassie placed the can of frozen orange juice on the counter and the loaf of bread beside it. She dumped the change and the receipt on the table.

“The bay’s worried, Mama.”

“Worried?”

“It knows who killed somebody.”

“Oh.” Her mother twisted her face around over her shoulder. “You mean the Harstead girl? I heard about that.”

Cassie nodded and then told her mother what Mr. Cox had said about how the searchers found the body on Hicklebickle Rock with lilies all around.

Her mother shook her head. “It’s a shame. Could be someone we know did that. This is a small town.”

Cassie folded the sack as she gazed through the front room and out the door, straight across the mudflats and the shallow green water to Hicklebickle Rock. From this angle it was an ordinary round-topped boulder, the kneeling Indian woman only a shadow.


“If I get that job in Rutherford, we’re moving away from here,” her mother said. “I’ve never liked it here—never felt good about this place.”

“When will you know about the job, Mama?”

“This afternoon. They asked me to come back for a second interview.” Her mother dried her hands on a dishtowel. “Will you be all right? I don’t like leaving you alone, but I can’t count on Ben. I never know where he is until I hear that damn motorcycle outside.”

“I’ll be okay, Mama.”

“I’d call someone to sit with you, but I don’t get paid for another



week and all we have is that twenty in my purse and," she eyed the money on the table, "looks like six dollars and some change." She sighed. "And the car is on empty."

"It's okay, Mama. I can take care of myself."

"Good girl. Just stay here at home."

Her mother showered, dressed, and combed her hair.

"Mama, how did Hicklebickle Rock get its name?" Cassie leaned against the bathroom doorway watching her mother apply rosy lipstick.

"I always thought it sounded like a witch's chant . . . you know, like 'Double, double toil and trouble'? But my friend Gretchen Boyd told me that hicklebickle means out-of-place, or misplaced, or not belonging where you are, or something like that. Maybe it just means lost."

A few minutes later Cassie's mother backed their '67 Chevy Nova out of the carport and down the driveway. Cassie waved goodbye and then returned to the kitchen and made herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She spotted Ben's binoculars on the windowsill, looped their strap around her neck, and, holding the binoculars in one hand and the sandwich in the other, ran down to sit beneath the big alder tree by the mudflats. She sniffed the air again.

"Will Mama get that job?" Cassie asked. She took a big bite from the sandwich and squinted at the strip of water out in the center of the bay. A breeze ruffled the leaves above her head, and the chug-chug-chug of an inboard motor from a boat she couldn't see came across the water from out in the straits. She chewed slowly, swallowed, and took another bite. A bright green leaf landed on her head and slid to her lap. "Good. Will we all move to Rutherford and be happy there?" A few seconds later a brownish frog hopped along the dry bank and then leaped behind a log. Cassie smiled.

She finished the sandwich, licked her fingers, and was about to go inside when she spotted a bird high in the sky above the bay. It circled slowly, wings spread wide. Cassie lifted the binoculars and adjusted the focus. The bird's head was snowy white.

"Oooh, a bald eagle," Cassie said. The eagle circled for another few minutes and then glided over the treetops across the bay. Cassie's gaze dropped to the water's edge, down to Hicklebickle Rock. The stone Indian woman knelt as always on the outer edge of the boulder, her sad stone face and eyes gazing out over the water. Cassie was sure that the Indian woman heard her when she talked to the bay, even if she whispered. She believed the Indian woman knew everything that happened around Bristleton.

Cassie's mother had told her once, "There's an old superstition about the rock woman, about how she was once a real Indian princess. The cruel priest of her tribe demanded that all the children in their village be sacrificed, but the princess intervened and saved

the children, and then the priest was so angry he turned her to stone." Cassie thought that was a very sad story.

"Hey, what are you doing with my binoculars?" Ben leaned against the trunk of the big alder. "You didn't ask me first."

Startled, Cassie jumped. "You weren't here to ask."

"Take them inside, right now." Ben shoved away from the tree and strode across the yard toward the house.

Cassie followed from a distance. "I didn't hurt them," she said.

"Where's Mom?"

"Gone to her job interview."

Ben snorted. "Nobody's going to hire her. She can't do anything except work at a tavern."

"She said she had a real good job once—when you were little and she had to leave you at a day care and that's why you're . . ."

"And that's why I'm *what*?" Ben prompted.

"That's why you're so mean. She says she should have stayed home with you more."

"She said I'm mean?"

"No, she said you're 'the way you are' or something like that."

Ben snorted again. "What a joke. If I *really* wanted to be mean . . . well, she doesn't know the half of it."

Cassie followed Ben into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator, leaned on the open door for a full minute, and then slammed it shut. "Nothing to eat in this place. Never anything to eat."

"There's peanut butter and jelly."

Ben's eyes shifted toward the loaf of bread on the counter, frowning as though considering it.

"I'll make it for you," Cassie offered.

Ben shrugged, nodded, and headed toward the front room.

When Cassie took the sandwich to Ben, he was sprawled on the front steps with the binoculars jammed against his eyes.

"Here," Cassie said.

Ben took the sandwich and bit into it.

"You're welcome. What are you looking at with the binoculars?"

"Nothing."

"Ben?"

"What?"

"Did you know the Harstead girl? Mr. Cox said that neighbors heard a motorcycle go up and down the road the afternoon she disappeared."

Ben lowered the binoculars but continued to stare out across the bay.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

“What if the police come here, asking about that day and about your motorcycle?”

Ben turned. “Don’t care if they do—I ain’t done nothin’.”

Cassie leaned against the open door. After another moment Ben continued. He sounded angry.

“I suppose you and Mom have it all figured out. Ben is mean. He’s no good—he probably killed that girl, and someday he’ll start killing people left and right. Is that it? You and Mom think I’m some kind of psycho nut?”

“I didn’t say that. I was just wondering.”

“Wondering if I would do something like that?”

“Well, you *are* mean all the time.”

“Get away from me, you little idiot. You don’t know anything. You don’t know what I know! I’m not half as mean as Dad was. He used to hit Mom, and sometimes he’d kick me . . . but he ran off when you were born and . . .” Ben grabbed Cassie by the arm. He pulled her through the door and gave her a shove. She stumbled down the steps and went to her knees in the dust. She heard the door slam and the lock click.

“Ben!” Cassie climbed the steps and pounded on the door. “I didn’t really think that you . . . hurt anybody.”

A song from a Metallica album blared, drowning out her voice. Her fist felt bruised. She stopped hitting the door, turned and squinted at the bay.

It was very hot on the front stoop. Heat waves rose from the front yard and along the driveway. There was no breeze now from off the bay, no leaves rustling to suggest coolness near the water. There was only the monotonous clicking of grasshoppers from deep within the blackberry vines. The sound only made Cassie feel hotter.

She headed for town. At least Cox’s Grocery was air-conditioned. Halfway down the driveway she looked back at the house.

She was certain she saw Ben in the front window, elbows against the glass as if he were watching her with his binoculars. She stuck her tongue out, just in case he was.

Cassie reached the old abandoned gas station and sat down in its shade. She leaned against the crusty front doors, too hot and tired to walk any farther. After awhile she stretched out in the yellow grass and fell asleep, and when she woke the building’s shadow was even wider, stretching clear across the road. But it was still hot. She got to her feet and continued into town.

“Back again, Cassie?” Mr. Cox looked surprised. He smiled.

Cassie closed the door and took a deep breath of the cool store air. “I don’t have any money, just need to cool off,” she said.

“It’s a hot one, all right. You walked all the way over here just to cool off?”

“I accidentally locked myself out,” Cassie said. She wouldn’t tell Mr. Cox about Ben shoving her outside and locking the door. Mama said the people in this town were gossips and to never tell them anything they could “spread around”—it was none of their business.

“Isn’t your mother there to let you in?”

“She’s at a job interview.” It was okay to tell him that, Cassie decided. That was something good. Nobody could “gossip bad” about a job interview.

“Oh, that’s nice. A job here in Bristleton?”

“Nope. Over in Rutherford.”

“Oh . . . well, that’s an hour’s drive from here. She won’t be back until after dark. Where’s your brother this fine evening?”

“I don’t know. Riding his motorcycle somewhere.”

“Poor kid. All alone, huh? How about a Popsicle?—a free one on me.”

“Really?”

“I have a few extra grape ones—need to get rid of them before they start tasting like the frost in the freezer.” He lifted the lid on the ice cream bin and held out a grape Popsicle. The paper wrapper was frosted and dotted with tiny ice crystals. Cassie pulled off the wrapper and stuck the tip of the sweet purple ice in her mouth. For a few seconds it stuck to her tongue, but then it melted and she bit the tip and smashed it against the insides of her upper teeth. She smiled. “Thanks.”

“Taste good?”

Cassie nodded.


“Nothing too good for my best customer,” Mr. Cox said.

Cassie nodded again. The Popsicle did taste odd. Stale, or kind of like the cough syrup Mama gave her when she had a cold. The inside of her mouth felt numb, and there was a sick-sweet taste in the back of her throat after she swallowed.

“Why don’t you sit down over there by the window and read some comic books? I’m about ready to tally the receipts and close up, but you can rest here where it’s nice and cool for another half hour. Okay?” Mr. Cox walked to the front door and turned the little sign so the CLOSED side faced the street.

Cassie sat down on the bench beneath the window. It didn’t feel cool inside the store any more, didn’t feel cool, didn’t feel warm, sort of in-between. It only felt cool when you first stepped inside.

The Popsicle was only a third gone. Cassie didn’t want the rest of it. She was certain that if she ate any more she’d be sick. She searched for a place to dispose of it. The garbage can was up near the front counter. She didn’t want to throw it away right in front of Mr. Cox, not after he had been so nice in giving it to her free. She smoothed out



the paper wrapper and slid the Popsicle back in. Then she very quietly lifted the lid on the frozen food bin and dropped it inside.

She eyed the comic books along the bottom row of the magazine display, but none of them tempted her to leave the bench. The bench had a thin, soft pad. The pad was covered with a striped fabric that reminded her of her own pillow at home, her pillow with a sturdy striped fabric that held the feathers inside. She wished she were home now, resting on her own bed with her own pillow. Darn Ben anyway. She lay down on the padded bench and closed her eyes.

Cassie woke to a gentle rocking motion. It felt as though her bed was swaying. Her room was darker than usual. At first she thought Ben was pulling her mattress out from under her, inch by inch, and she wanted to say *Stop it, Ben*, but her tongue was numb. It refused to form a word.

Then she heard water sloshing and the thump-grind-thump of oars. She was in a boat. Wrapped in a tarp. The air inside the tarp was hot, humid, and heavy with a flowery, sweet smell. The smell reminded her of the grape Popsicle. She swallowed, feeling a little sick. She licked her lips with her stiff tongue.

The sound of the oars died, and a few seconds later the boat ground to a halt in coarse sand. The tarp slipped open enough for Cassie to see light, moonlight almost as bright as day; then she heard footsteps in the sand. The boat was dragged farther ashore.

Her heart began pounding harder and harder. Her eyes strained to see something, anything, through the gap in the tarp. *Sand!* The only spot in the whole bay where there was sand was the beach surrounding Hicklebickle Rock—the place for human sacrifice. Like the Harstead girl. Cassie straightened her legs, felt the curve of the boat's bulkhead against the bottoms of her Keds. The other bulkhead pressed against the top of her head. It was a small boat, and she was stuffed beneath its bow.

Someone pulled on the tarp, and Cassie closed her eyes again, pretending to be asleep. She felt herself lifted and carried ashore, still wrapped in the tarp. The kidnapper gasped for breath as he climbed the sandy bank; a moment later he laid Cassie down and peeled the tarp away. Cool air caressed her face. She smelled the salty, iodine smell of Bristleton Bay, but she kept her eyes closed. Heavy fingers brushed stray hairs from her eyes and arranged her hair around her face. Her shirt was twisted but her captor pulled it straight, and then he overlapped her hands across her chest and straightened her legs, moving the heels of her Keds together.

"Pretty baby," he whispered.

Cassie opened her eyes but only a crack, only enough to see down over her own cheeks toward her feet. Mr. Cox knelt by her knees, his

hands wavering above her chest as if he were uncertain of his own actions, uncertain of what to do next.

"You're perfect," he continued to whisper. "A virgin—a *pure* sacrifice."

He twisted around suddenly as though remembering something. "The flowers!" He scrambled to his feet. A shoe grated beside Cassie's ear, and then his footsteps continued on by. A moment later she heard the sounds of him climbing into the boat. She opened her eyes and lifted her head. Mr. Cox leaned down and gathered something from the center of the boat. When he straightened, his arms were filled with lilies. He climbed out of the rowboat and plodded up the sandy bank again.

Cassie looked around. She *was* on Hicklebickle Rock. Dizzy, she pushed herself to her feet and stumbled back along the top of the rock, but Mr. Cox dropped the lilies on the beach and ran toward her, blocking the only exit.

"Don't be afraid, Cassie. I . . . it won't hurt much, I promise."

Cassie backed along the top of the rock toward the water, toward that white, shimmering moonpath that cut straight across the bay toward her house. Toward Mama and Ben. She wished she were home right now. She wished it were noon instead of night, and she wished she were down by the water picking lemon-yellow buttercups in the sun instead of out here on this rock with nowhere to turn. The water below the rock was black. It looked deep.

Cassie screamed, and a few seconds later it sounded as though another girl on the opposite shore screamed exactly the same way.

"No, no! Shhhh." Mr. Cox waved his bony white hands back and forth. "Cassie, don't be afraid. You know me, I've always been nice to you."

Cassie screamed again. She staggered toward the tip of the giant's thumb, toward the stone Indian woman with a blanket around her shoulders.


"Help!" Cassie fell beside the stone woman and reached out to grasp the corner of the cold stone blanket. "Please help me."

Bright moonlight reflected on the woman's stone face, on her forehead, nose, and cheeks, and on her hands clasped beneath her chin in a prayerful pose—so perfect in the moonlight, as perfect as if the formation had been carved by human hands instead of by nature. But she was just a rock.

"Cassie, Cassie," Mr. Cox crooned. "Let me help you join all the virgins sacrificed here throughout the centuries—you'll be a *goddess*, and Quetzalcoatl will grant me power because I gave you to him at this sacred place." His eyes were as wild and round as the moon.

"No! Help!"

Mr. Cox picked her up, his arms around her middle. She kicked and



scratched, but he shoved her down on the rock again and wrapped his hands around her throat. His fingers were big and tight and squeezing. Soon her ears rang, and her tongue felt too big for her mouth. She wanted to gag, to vomit, but his hands wouldn't let her. He squeezed tighter, and then everything started going white around the edges, just like when Ben had tied her to the alder tree and left her and she had fought the rope until she almost fainted. Cassie kicked again, felt her foot strike Mr. Cox's shoulder, but it wasn't enough. She felt herself floating again, floating inches off the rock, felt as if she could float away, and then she kicked again, as hard as she could, one last desperate kick. Mr. Cox grunted. His grip loosened on her throat. And over his shoulder Cassie saw the stone Indian woman rise to her feet. The woman was much taller than Cassie had imagined, a giant rock woman towering ten feet tall, with shining eyes, eyes as black and deep and wet as the bay. Mr. Cox must have heard something—some soft stepping sound the stone woman made, because he turned and looked . . . and released Cassie.

She heard voices, but she couldn't see anything or anyone. It was very dark all around her, as if she were at the bottom of a well, slowly floating upward toward a tiny, distant light.

A man spoke. He was nearby, his deep voice cutting through the dark air.

"Looks to me like he slipped and fell, doesn't it? Like the outer edge of Hicklebickle Rock gave way beneath him."

"Yes, sir, sheriff," another man said from farther away. "There's been some recent erosion on the rock up there. It's quite a drop to the beach from that spot. His neck is broken. Snapped like a twig."

"Just as well. It'll save the taxpayers from trying the s.o.b."

"The girl's family is arriving from across the bay in the police launch, sir."

Cassie heard a motorboat, and then the motor died and she heard footsteps in the coarse sand. "Cassie baby!" Mama's voice.

I'm here, Mama. I'm here, Cassie wanted to say, but she couldn't. She floated toward the light, faster and faster. The light was now a small moon.

Cassie heard a man's voice. "You're the mother? I'm Sheriff Larken. The paramedics are with her. They said she'll be okay, just bruised."

"Where is she?" It was Ben's voice.

"Over there. Wrapped in a blanket. She was half conscious when we found her, mumbling about Mr. Cox choking her—and then something about the stone Indian woman saving her. An hallucination, I guess, or it could be from shock."

"I can't hardly believe this happened," Mama said. Her voice shook. "How did you know that Mr. Cox was the killer?"

“He recently placed a large order for bulbs through a wholesale nursery—all lilies. When dispatch relayed your call about your daughter being missing, we were already headed over to his store to question him. He was gone—and so was his boat.”

Cassie’s eyes finally focused. The small moon she’d seen was a spotlight atop a police van. She felt the blanket around her, felt the solid ground through the blanket, felt her body waken, felt her mind clear. She took a deep breath and turned her head to the side. Mama and Ben were standing nearby. A big man in a uniform leaned closer to Mama. “You okay?” he said. “You look sort of pale. Maybe you should sit down.” Mama sank to the sand.

“I want to see Cassie,” Ben said.

“I guess that’s okay, but don’t make her talk, son.”

Ben strode toward Cassie and fell to his knees beside her. “Jeez, brat,” he whispered. “I shouldn’t have locked you out.” He swallowed and looked away. His whisper grew so soft she couldn’t hear him, but she read his lips. “I’m sorry.”

Cassie nodded. She had never seen tears in Ben’s eyes before.

He sniffed, wiped his nose on his sleeve. His lips quivered into a painful looking smile.

“Kicked him,” Cassie managed. Her voice sounded scratchy. Her throat hurt.

“You must’ve kicked him pretty good! He landed on the beach down there. See? Quick, take a look before they cover him up.”

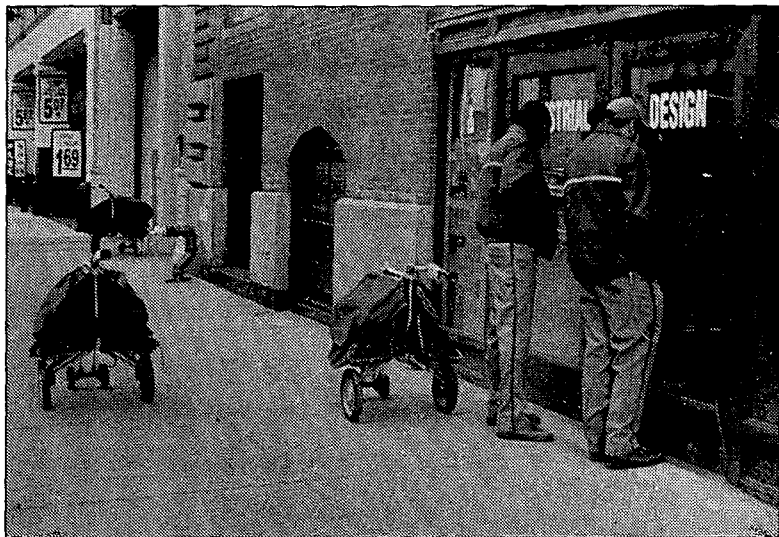
Cassie shoved the blanket away and pushed herself up until she was sitting. Mr. Cox lay amidst broken rock and sand with the lilies scattered all around him. Cassie looked out across the top of Hicklebickle Rock, surprised to see the Indian woman kneeling again, her back turned toward the beach, her face, as usual, aimed out across the bay.

“She saved me,” Cassie croaked.

“She’s just a rock, brat. She isn’t real.”

“No.” Cassie shook her head, looked at Ben, shook her head again, and looked back at the stone Indian woman. Mama and Ben and the police weren’t going to believe her. They thought Mr. Cox had fallen off the rock, that she had kicked him and made him lose his balance. They thought the Indian woman was just a rock. But Cassie would never forget the woman’s eyes—eyes as black and deep and wet as the bay.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Seeking better mousetraps? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

The Devil Hath Power

B. K. Stevens



It's not just about me this time," said Eddie LaRue anxiously, twiddling not just his thumbs but, somehow, all of his fingers. He was short, wiry, and sallow, greasy-haired and furtive-eyed, somewhere around fifty, wearing a battered Orioles cap with the visor scrunched low, baggy tan pants, a less-than-spotless T-shirt, a ragged black windbreaker with the collar hunched up. As far as I was concerned, he might as well have *loser* tattooed on his forehead and be done with it. He stopped twiddling and sat forward. "If it was just about me, I wouldn't ask. But I'm worried about Grandma."

Miss Woodhouse raised one thick, straight, disapproving eyebrow. "Your grandmother's in trouble? Again?"

"No, no," Eddie assured her. "Not *my* grandma. *My* grandma's doing fine. Oh, she had a little problem this fall, but she got probation on account of her age, and she swears she's had it with chopping cars. These days she mostly plays canasta. Mostly. No, it's Grandma Valerie I'm worried about. You know—Valerie Morris. She runs Grandma's Bundles."

Miss Woodhouse nodded slowly. "I've heard of it. A variation on Meals-on-Wheels, isn't it?"

"That's right," Eddie said eagerly. "Grandma's Bundles—Food Delivery for Environmentally Responsible Shut-ins. It's a great operation, Miss W. Strictly organic vegetables, free-range

chickens, and we recycle *everything*. I'm doing my community service with her, and believe me, I'm grateful. I hadda find a non-profit that'd let me volunteer, but most do-gooders don't trust ex-cons. Grandma's different. I met her while I was still in the slammer—that's another of her good works, she comes every Sunday, brings cookies for all the guys—and when I came up for parole, she looked me in the eye and said, 'Are you through being a burglar, Eddie?' and I said, 'Yes, ma'am, I am,' and that was that. Grandma says everyone deserves a second chance."

"Or, in your case, an eleventh chance," Professor Woodhouse said dryly. She was sitting in her rocker near the big sunny bay window, so absorbed in punching holes in a two liter plastic Diet Coke bottle that I'd thought she wasn't paying attention to the conversation. But as always she had heard every word. She gave a sly twitch to the long grey braid stretching well past her waist. "Or would this be your twelfth chance?"

"Somewhere in the double digits," Eddie admitted frankly. "I'm not proud of that, Professor W. But this is the last chance I'll need. Miss W. knew that the last time she got me busted—and I truly appreciate that, Miss W., because if you hadn't convinced the cops that I'd broke into Mr. Allyn's house but hadn't murdered his brother, that Mr. Allyn had done that himself, well, I'd never've seen daylight again."

But Miss W. believed in me and now Grandma Valerie believes in me, and I'd cut off my right arm to help either of you, I'm that thankful."

"You're left-handed," Miss Woodhouse observed, "but I appreciate the sentiment. Harriet, why don't you pour more tea for our guest?" I had to do it, but it stung. Even though I'm officially a secretary, I like to think of myself as an assistant private detective—and no matter what my job was, I wouldn't enjoy pouring tea for a lowlife like Eddie LaRue. Where did Miss Woodhouse get off, calling him a guest? "So, Eddie," she said. "You think Valerie Morris is in trouble?"

"I'm afraid she's gonna be." Eddie sat back, and the frantic finger-twiddling began again. "See, I've been volunteering for her for about two months now, delivering lunches to these elderly folks—I've got eight of 'em on my route, most all of 'em are nice, it's pretty interesting, and my boss doesn't mind if I'm a few minutes late getting back to work, on account of I'm doing good deeds. It was going great. Then just a week ago this janitor who worked for Grandma hung himself."

"Hanged himself," the Professor corrected, still rocking, still punching holes, not missing a beat. "Pictures are hung, Eddie. People are hanged. I believe I read about the incident."

"You probably did," Eddie said, sighing. "Poor Joe, not even thirty, friendly guy. Anyhow, he was found hung—hanged—in his

apartment last Tuesday morning. That same day—it was just before noon, I was at Grandma's Bundles picking up my lunches—this big guy strides in, asks if there are any vacancies. That's weird, isn't it? Him just happening to show up looking for work, just a few hours after Joe was found dead?"

Miss Woodhouse looked skeptical. "You aren't implying this 'big guy,' as you put it, was involved in the janitor's death?"

"No, I guess not," Eddie said reluctantly. "I mean, I know that'd sound nuts. But Joe sure never seemed like the kinda guy who'd kill himself, and—well, it was weird, that's all. Anyhow, Grandma takes this big guy into the kitchen for an interview, and when I come back the next day, there he is pushin' a broom, acting like he's been there forever. Obviously he got the job. Problem is, I know this guy. His name is George Folis—I ran into him when I was doing a stint in state prison twelve, thirteen years ago. Man, was he *bad*. He was in for armed robbery, and he had all us burglars scared stiff. He was always acting tough, bullying us around, trying to impress the mob guys in there—and they're a close bunch, you can't impress them unless you're *real* tough. I bet Folis impressed them, though. He beat up lots of guys, and when one guy was strangled in the shower, folks said Folis did it, but there was no proof, and of course no charge."

Miss Woodhouse frowned.

She's an imposing woman—almost six feet tall, broad-shouldered, lean, her black-grey hair pulled back hard from her face, caught at the nape of her neck in a thick blue rubber band. When she frowns, you notice. "And now George Folis is working as a janitor at Grandma's Bundles?"

"That's right," Eddie LaRue said. "And it stinks. I mean, he's a fast lane sorta guy—what's he doin' pushing a broom? He's up to something, Miss W. I mean, Grandma's Bundles is nonprofit, but the old folks we help aren't poor—they gotta pay part of the costs or they'd be eating additive-laced red meat outa Styrofoam dishes like everybody else. So I figure Folis is casing Grandma's clients. He doesn't have a regular route, but whenever a volunteer can't make it, he takes over. He's probably identifying the best targets, and pretty soon he'll hit 'em all in one night, maybe leave a coupla bodies behind, maybe hurt Grandma Valerie herself. She's not poor, either—she was some big deal in commercial real estate before she retired and started Grandma's Bundles. Folis might rip *her* off, too. You gotta stop him, Miss W."

I don't usually speak up when Miss Woodhouse is talking to a client, but I could see the way this interview was headed and I didn't like it. "Why don't you go to the police?" I asked.

"And tell them what?" Eddie demanded. "That an ex-con is working for Grandma's Bundles and he's probably up to no good?"

Hell, I'm an ex-con, too. Why should they think he's any worse than me? And if I tell Grandma what I know about Folis, she'll probably just say everyone deserves a second chance—that's her way, she's a saint—and if she *does* get scared and fire him, maybe he'll hurt her. I sure don't want *that*."

Miss Woodhouse picked up a pencil and began gnawing on it thoughtfully. "You recognized Mr. Folis, Eddie," she said. "Did he recognize you?"

"He didn't seem to," Eddie said. "Why should he? He was the big tough guy in prison. I was just one of the twerpie burglars—he shoved out of place in the chow line. And of course I've stayed out of his way at Grandma's Bundles. I'm scared to go back there, Miss W., and that's a fact."

"Then you *shan't* go back," the Professor said decisively. She's an imposing woman, too, almost as tall and solid as her daughter. She held up her pockmarked Diet Coke bottle. "All finished, Iphigenia. It should serve admirably as a colander, albeit a somewhat narrow-mouthed one."

Miss Woodhouse tried to smile. "Our twenty-third colander. Thank you, Mother. It's lovely."

"It is indeed," Professor Woodhouse said proudly. "You see, Iphigenia? Always some practical use can be found for objects that would otherwise be thoughtlessly discarded. Now, as to Mr. LaRue's dilemma. He mustn't return to Grandma's Bundles—

there's a chance Mr. Folis might recognize him eventually and use violent means to conceal his violent past. Could not our dear little Harriet temporarily assume Mr. LaRue's rounds of mercy, and use the opportunity to learn more about Mr. Folis?"

Damn. I'd known that sooner or later one of the Woodhouses would suggest that. "I'm always happy to help a customer," I said, thinking of how overworked I was already, of how small my paychecks were, of how many of our clients never pay up. "And what payment plan do you have in mind, Mr. LaRue?"

He blushed. He's an ex-convict many times over, but he blushed. "Well, I don't have all that much cash on hand. I mean, I've got a steady job at Donuts Deluxe, but the pay's not great. So I was figuring maybe ten dollars a week when I can spare it? I mean, the cops'd just laugh me off, and if they didn't, they'd cause a scandal, and where'd Grandma's Bundles be then? I gotta handle it discreet, and I gotta have the best. I gotta have you, Miss W. Whaddaya say?"

"I say five dollars a week," Miss Woodhouse said, setting a new record for sweetness, "when you can spare it. When you can't, don't worry. The important thing, Eddie, is that you stay straight. Harriet, report to Grandma's Bundles at eleven fifty. Say Eddie's sick and you're his niece and you'll take over his rounds until he's better." She glanced affectionately at her

computer and telephone—the main tools of her trade these days, since her mother doesn't like her to leave the house. "I'll check on George Folis, find out what he's been up to since he got out of prison. And you'll keep track of what he's doing now."

"That's fine, Miss Woodhouse," I said, "except that I'm also doing surveillance on that divorce case for Mrs. Loy, and she's paid us a full month in advance. Then there's that insurance fraud case I'd really like to get into, and—"

"'Little deeds of kindness,' dear Harriet," the Professor cut in serenely, "'And soggy drops of love, Can make a mighty puddle, And—' well, my memory of the poem seems imperfect." She selected an oversized coffee can from her recycling bin and flexed her hole-puncher. "My point, however, is that charity takes precedence over profit. Be on your way."

So, promptly at eleven forty-seven, I arrived at Grandma's Bundles, a quaint, small building in Annapolis's historic district—a restaurant at one time, possibly a fashionable one. Even on the street you could feel the sweet, heavy fragrance of the cinnamon rolls baking inside. I pushed open the large wooden door and found myself face to face with George Folis.

Eddie's description of Folis had been short of vivid—it had consisted entirely of the words "big," "ugly," and "mean"—but in this case three words did the job. Fo-

lis loomed, flicked a speck of red meat from between his front teeth, and snarled. "Hey," he said. "I don't know you. Whadaya doing here?"

I straightened my shoulders and tried to look at ease. "I'm Harriet, Eddie LaRue's niece. Uncle Eddie's got the flu. I'm here to take over his route until he's better."

"LaRue never mentioned no niece," Folis said, and snarled again before leading me through the large high-ceilinged room and rapping loudly on the kitchen door. "Hey, Grandma. There's a dame here, claims she's LaRue's niece. Says he's sick, and she'll do his route. But LaRue never mentioned no niece."

The kitchen door opened and Grandma stepped out, wiping her hands on a bright gingham apron. She looked exactly the way a woman who runs Grandma's Bundles *should* look—short, ever-so-slightly plump, grey hair gathered in a soft bun, twinkling blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, a gentle mouth, and a wrenchingly kind smile. "Oh dear," she said, "poor Eddie's sick? Is it serious?"

"Just a twenty-four hour thing, I hope," I said, meaning it. I didn't want to waste more than one day on this case.

"I hope so, too," Grandma said. "And you're his niece?"

"LaRue never mentioned no niece," Folis put in. It was apparently his one insight, and he was proud of it.

Grandma's mouth crinkled in

an almost-frown. "I don't know that you and Eddie have had all that many extended conversations, George. It's not surprising that he hasn't given you a complete listing of his relatives. Now, dear. It's so nice of you to help poor Eddie, to help all of us. I'll show you how our delivery system works, and before you leave, I'll give you some of my boysenberry jam to take to Eddie. Mother always said it had amazing restorative powers. What did you say your name is?"

She linked her arm through mine and led me to the long, narrow, basket-laden tables that nearly filled the outer room. The baskets with red ribbons, she explained, were for clients on the regular diet. The blue-ribboned baskets were for diabetics, the green-ribboned ones for vegetarians, the white-ribbons for the lactose intolerant. There was a neatly typed list to tell me the names and dietetic needs of the eight people on my route, a laminated map with their houses and apartment buildings highlighted.

"They all live quite close to each other, you see," she said, "so you should be able to finish your route in just over an hour." She sighed. "I don't know *what* we'd do without our wonderful volunteers. There are so many people who need our help—our waiting list is sadly long. Without you dear people we couldn't manage at all."

"I could take a dinner route, too," I offered, eager to gather evidence quickly and speed this

case along. "My schedule's very flexible."

"Thank you, dear, but we have some *lovely* young people—high school and college students—who handle our dinner deliveries for us. And since they're not working under lunch hour constraints, they have time to collect the previous day's dirty dishes and linen and bring them back here."

"Dirty dishes and linen?" I asked, startled.

"Why yes, dear," Grandma said, smiling in gentle reproof. "We would *never* use disposable dishes, or paper napkins. *That* wouldn't be environmentally responsible, now would it? Well, you'd better run along. And thank you, dear."

George Folis helped me carry the eight baskets out to my car, snarling steadily, not saying a word. He slammed my car door shut. "Just drop the baskets off and move on," he said. "Don't get chatty. While you're gossipin', old folks are goin' hungry." He gave me a final glare. "LaRue never mentioned no niece," he muttered under his breath and lumbered off.

I still wasn't happy about being on this case, but I enjoyed making the deliveries. The first six people on my route were all very friendly, all very grateful for my help, all terribly sorry to hear about Eddie's illness. At every stop I gathered more advice on home remedies, more recipes for chicken soup. Finally I pulled up to Restful Harbor Retirement Suites. My last two clients were

in suites 202 and 203—that was handy. I pulled the green-ribbed basket for Mrs. Gladys Howe and the white-ribbed one for Mrs. Joan Baxter from my back seat, took a short elevator ride, and rang the doorbell of suite 202.

Mrs. Howe opened the door immediately—she must have been standing right behind it waiting for me. She was a tall, stocky, obviously still-feisty woman at least in her mid-eighties, wearing a boldly patterned purple and gold housecoat and leaning heavily on a thick wooden cane. She eyed me suspiciously. "You're late," she said. "And you're not Eddie."

"No, I'm his niece Harriet," I said cheerfully. "Uncle Eddie's sick. Where should I put this basket, Mrs. Howe?"

She paused a moment before answering, and her tiny eyes gleamed. "On the kitchen table. Mine's got the white ribbon."

I checked my list. "No, I think you're supposed to get the one with the green ribbon. You're a vegetarian, aren't you?"

She pursed her lips in frustration. "Oh, all right. The green ribbon, then. You're right—I'm not one of those damn lactose intolerants. Never *did* trust people who won't drink milk. God's own juice, and they think they're too good for it. Most of them aren't too good to eat meat, though. Kill the cow, but despise her gifts. Does *that* make sense to you?"

"Oh well." I walked quickly through her sparsely furnished

living room, the walls hung with old movie posters and framed, faded playbills. "Different people have different tastes."

She struck the floor with her cane so sharply that I jumped. "It's not a matter of taste, damn it! It's right and wrong! Feeding off dead animals—it makes me sick. I don't see why Valerie Morris caters to those damn carrion-kissers at all. Another thing. I've got a sister in the next block, ninety-two, nasty, cheap witch, never liked her, but at least she doesn't eat meat. *She's* lactose intolerant, she's in a wheelchair, and she's begged Grandma for deliveries for years. Does she get them? No. Why does a spry young carnivore like Joan Baxter rate and my sister doesn't?"

"I don't know," I said, desperate to get out of there. "It's my first day on the job. Grandma said she has a long waiting list. I'm sure she'd love to help your sister. As soon as Grandma finds more volunteers—"

"My sister'll be dead before that day comes round," Mrs. Howe said darkly, "and good riddance, the cheap witch, and I hope she at least has the decency to leave me her Monet, but till she goes, she ought to get deliveries. Joan Baxter doesn't deserve them. She's spry, I tell you—that damn walker of hers doesn't fool *me*—and she's richer than Trump, even richer than he *used* to be. If she needs special food, she can damn well hire a cook. *I'll* tell you why Joan Baxter gets deliveries. It's because

she knows Valerie Morris personally. They used to hang out together at the Silver Citizens' Center before Valerie Morris decided to start Grandma's Bundles and Joan Baxter all of a sudden decided she was a cripple. They're damned Brown Earthers, both of them. Tell me this. Is your Uncle Eddie a crook?"

I was so stunned that I hardly knew how to reply. "He—well, he's done time for burglary, but he's changed. He—"

"I knew it," Mrs. Howe said, satisfied. "He *looks* like a crook. All the ones who bring us lunch look like crooks, and all the ones who bring us dinner look like damned Boy Scouts. *You* don't look like a crook or a Boy Scout. You look like a nice girl—not bright but nice. If you let me peek in Joan Baxter's basket, I'll give you some candy, and—"

There was a tentative rap at the door. "Eddie?" a tired voice called. "Are you in there? I'm very hungry."

"Damn!" Mrs. Howe said. She hobbled rapidly to her front door and flung it open. "Joan Baxter! You damned carnivore!"

I could see a sweet, frail-looking woman of seventy or so standing in the hallway supported by a metal walker. I snatched up the white-ribboned basket, ashamed. "I'm just on my way to you, Mrs. Baxter," I said. "I'm Harriet, Eddie LaRue's niece. He's sick, and I'm taking over his route. I'm sorry I'm late."

"Oh, that's all right," Mrs. Baxter said, smiling gently. "It's just

that I *am* a bit hungry, and I could hear you talking, and—well. I hope Eddie's not *too* sick. Is it a cold, or—”

“Carrion-kisser!” Mrs. Howe shrieked. “Brown-earther! As if you cared about Eddie, or the earth, or anyone but yourself and your hoodlum grandson! You're in cahoots with Valerie Morris and Al Gore, you're hoarding the Q vitamins, you're—”

She was still screaming curses as Joan Baxter and I made the short, slow journey to suite 203. “I'm so sorry you had to hear that,” Mrs. Baxter said. “Gladys is—well, she used to be a lovely person. She taught drama at the high school, and she was a very talented amateur actress herself. I've seen her perform. She was a dazzling Lady Macbeth, a compelling Gertrude, a poignant Nurse. But the years have taken their toll.”

“I can see that,” I said sympathetically as she opened the door to her apartment. It was beautifully, tastefully furnished, with custom-made draperies and antique furniture. “She kept talking about Brown-earthers. What is a Brown-earther, anyway?”

Mrs. Baxter shook her head wearily. “It's some conspiracy theory Gladys has, some delusion about people who pretend to love the environment but actually seek to harm it. I think Communists are involved somehow, and aliens. Poor Gladys! She was quite normal until her husband died eight years ago. Then she lost touch. I can understand.

When my dear husband died—oh my.”

She sighed deeply, and my own eyes got misty. Gently I set the white-ribbed basket down on her enameled coffee table. “But you have a grandson, don't you?” I said.

She smiled gratefully. “Yes, I have dear Brandon. He goes to McHenry Community College.” She handed me a silver-framed photograph, and I oohed in genuine admiration. Even at nineteen or whatever, this guy was a hunk—short blond hair, big blue eyes, features so cleancut they'd probably squeak if you touched them. And *this* was the guy Mrs. Howe had called a hoodlum?

“He looks very nice,” I said.

“He *is* very nice,” Mrs. Baxter said. “He was Grandma Valerie's very first high school volunteer, did you know that? He helped her get everything started four years ago, and he still brings me my dinner every night. He's *such* a lovely boy.”

“Well, I'm glad you get to see him so often,” I said, and chatted with her for a few moments before saying goodbye. What a contrast between those two ladies, I thought as I walked down the hall. They're both widows, there aren't that many years separating them, but Mrs. Baxter is still so cheerful and sweet, and Mrs. Howe—well. And ten years ago, probably no one could have predicted which way either would turn out. It made me wonder what *I'll* be like when that time of life comes round.

I was still distracted by those thoughts when I got to my car, so distracted that I didn't notice the man standing across the street lounging against a rusty green Escort. "Hey, what's-your-name," he said. "You're behind schedule. You shoulda dropped off them baskets twenty minutes ago."

It was George Folis. The sight of him unnerved me so much that I faltered for an answer. "It's my first day on the route," I said. "I took a few wrong turns. And Mr. Wallace needed help with a stuck window, and I chatted for a few moments with—"

"I *told* you not to waste time talkin'," he cut in. "Them folks is all senile anyhow—they don't got nothing to say 'cept a buncha crap. Just drop off the baskets and move on. Understand?"

That made me mad. "What I *don't* understand," I said, "is why you work for Grandma if you have so little respect for the people she helps—and what you're doing here. Do you always check up on the volunteers?"

He took a stick of gum from his pocket, pushed it into his mouth, and tossed the wrapper into the street. "Sometimes," he said, "if there's somethin' funny about 'em. Like you sayin' you're LaRue's niece. LaRue never mentioned no niece."

"I think you've established that fact already." I managed to make my tone appropriately sarcastic, but he was scaring me. I unlocked my car door quickly. "If you're through checking up on me, I have to get back to work."

He leered. "Oh, I ain't done checking up on *you*, honey," he said. "Not by a long shot."

God. Without risking another word I got into my car and started it up. Before pulling away, though, I glanced up at the second floor of Restful Harbor Retirement Suites. Gladys Howe was standing in the window of suite 202, her purple and gold housecoat plainly visible behind the filmy white curtains. She probably thinks Folis and I were having a meeting of the Brown Earth Society, I thought, trying to make a joke of it; but I didn't know why she was there, and I didn't know why he was there, and I didn't like any of it.

“We're just finishing our lunch," said the Professor, greeting me at the door of Woodhouse Investigations. "Not much is left for you, I fear—just a few olive and onion cheese-puffs. They turned out splendidly, but Iphigenia didn't seem to have much appetite for them. I'll fix you a plate."

I followed her into the kitchen, where Miss Woodhouse was standing at the sink. "Not so lavish with the dishwashing liquid, Iphigenia," the Professor said sharply. "It may not be completely biodegradable—it might endanger the water supply. And *what* is that olive jar doing in the blue recycling-bin? Glass goes in the red bin—how many times must I tell you that?"

"I'm very sorry, Mother," Miss Woodhouse said in that meek, please-don't-hate-me tone she uses whenever the Professor scolds. I've seen Miss Woodhouse stare down a drug-crazed serial killer coming at her with a butcher knife, I've seen her stay cool and amused through hours of relentless cross-examination by a hostile defense attorney, but one cross word from her mother rips her apart. "It won't happen again."

"I should hope not."

The Professor handed me a plate of lumpy cheese-puffs and took a seat at the kitchen table. "Now, little Harriet. Tell us what you've seen and heard."

I tasted a cheese-puff nervously and was relieved to find it good. "There isn't much. I saw George Folis twice but only for a few minutes each time. Mostly I just delivered lunches—I won't bore you with the details about that."

"You never bore us," the Professor said, smiling kindly, "and, lovely child though you are, you frankly aren't clever enough to distinguish between what's significant and what isn't. Tell us everything."

So I did—every word George Folis said, every feature of Grandma's delivery system, every stop on my route, every detail from Mr. Wallace's stuck window to Mrs. Howe's Brown Earth mania to Mrs. Baxter's grandson. Eventually Miss Woodhouse joined us at the table and listened intently. When I finished, she nodded.

"So Eddie was right to be suspicious of George Folis," she said. "What you've said confirms what I learned this morning. Folis has been out of prison for several years. Until last week he was bagging groceries at Megamarket, not getting into any trouble with the law. So far, so good—except that two years ago he bought a three bedroom condominium at Rocky Cove."

"Rocky Cove?" I repeated, amazed. It was the plushest complex in town. When I'd first come to Annapolis, I'd stopped by, lured by tales of Olympic-sized pools and bathroom Jacuzzis. One glance at the price list had sent me staggering from the lobby. "He *can't* be making the mortgage payments by bagging groceries. Well, that settles it, Miss Woodhouse. Folis has obviously been making money illegally for years. We don't have to wait to see what he's up to at Grandma's Bundles. We can just notify the police and have them check on—"

"No police," Miss Woodhouse cut in, her back suddenly rigid. Her mother's back had snapped into an identical posture. The police were a sore subject in this house. Ever since the Professor had had her breakdown or whatever it was seventeen years ago, and had pressured Miss Woodhouse into resigning from the force and breaking her engagement to a fellow detective, contact with the police, and even mention of the police, had been virtually forbidden. It made Miss

Woodhouse's job as a private detective more difficult, but she coped with that as she coped with everything else. I should have known better.

I shrugged in apology, waiting for one of them to speak. Neither did. "Well then," I said heartily, "suppose I follow George Folis tonight. I'll go to Grandma's Bundles around five, park across the street, and wait for him to leave."

"And lose him three minutes later," Miss Woodhouse said sourly. "That's what usually happens when you follow someone."

It wasn't a nice thing to say, but I forgave her. She was under a lot of pressure. She always is. "I'll try to do better this time," I promised. "Maybe I'll find some clue to tell us what he's up to. I don't know what else I can do—unless you'd like me to try to track down Mrs. Howe's Brown-earthers."

"Do not jest about her delusions," the Professor said in a tone harsher than any she'd ever used to me before. "The delusions of old women must be taken into strict account. Often they reflect true wisdom and contain seeds of truth."

"I'm sorry," I said, and ran to my word processor to type reports I'd neglected for weeks. I seemed infected with tactlessness today. It would almost be a relief to drive to Grandma's Bundles and watch for George Folis.

I had to watch a long time. I parked across from Grandma's at four forty-five, in time to see the dinner volunteers arrive. I spotted Mrs. Baxter's grandson Brandon and maybe a dozen near-clones of Brandon—some male, some female, but all of them young, all of them cleancut, all of them neatly dressed, most of them blond. At four fifty-seven I did catch one glimpse of Folis. He was helping Brandon carry his eight baskets out to his ice-blue Jaguar, and the two men were locked in fierce conversation—not yelling but whispering intensely, both faces hot and angry. No wonder. Naturally, a nice kid like Brandon wouldn't like a scumball like Folis. Maybe Brandon'd caught Folis stealing a cinnamon roll and was threatening to tell Grandma. Poor kid, I thought. He doesn't know what he's up against.

By five past five all the volunteers had left, and there wasn't much action until six fifteen or so when they started straggling back bearing baskets that I knew were filled with dirty dishes and linen. All was quiet for half an hour and then the delivery trucks began arriving—one from True Veggies, with a burly African-American driver; one from Chick-Free, with a burly Hispanic driver; and one from Megamarket, with a scrawny Caucasian driver. I moved to a parking space half a block from the back entrance to get a better look. The scrawny driver was no stronger than he seemed—the other driv-

ers had unloaded their own trucks, but this guy just smoked cigarettes and inspected his fingernails while Folis carried carton after carton into Grandma's Bundles. They both disappeared inside for fifteen minutes—longer than the other drivers had stayed, but that made sense. After all Folis used to work at Megamarket. He probably knew this guy; they were probably chatting about old times. It was almost seven thirty when they walked out, the driver now with a thick manila envelope tucked under his arm—receipts, probably.

Moments later Grandma Valerie herself left, clutching her tiny purse and calling a cheerful goodbye to Folis as she climbed into the ancient VW bug parked in the one space behind her building. Time to move back out front, I judged, and it was the right decision. I got into position just in time to see Folis lock up and leave. But he looked different. He wore a billowy-sleeved red silk shirt and tight white linen pants, his neck weighed down by at least half a dozen thick gold chains, and his hair slicked back with at least half a gallon of Brylcreem. He still looked ugly, though. All right, you Grandma-menacing creep, I thought, putting my car in gear. I'm going to follow you, I'm going to find out what your game is, and I'm going to put you in the deep freeze for a long, long time. Just you try to shake me. Just you go ahead and try.

He shook me maybe ninety

seconds later. His rusty green Escort pulled into a parking garage less than a block away from Grandma's Bundles. It didn't worry me. I'd run surveillances here before and knew this garage had just one exit. All I had to do was to wait for the Escort to re-emerge and I'd be back in business. I watched car after car leave—a red Toyota, a blue Cavalier, a black BMW, a pink Civic.

By eight forty-five I was having misty-edged hallucinations about ladies' rooms, and I was getting suspicious. I got out of my car, walked into the garage, and saw a rusty green Escort parked in a corner spot. I found a pay phone and called Miss Woodhouse. "Miss Woodhouse," I gasped, "you know where George Folis lives. Do you know what sort of car he drives?"

"Why yes," she said, sounding surprised. "Don't you know? He has two cars—a 1984 green Escort purchased just last week and a 1996 black BMW, license plate number—"

"Never mind." I slammed the receiver down. Rats, I thought. Oh well. Tomorrow was another day, another lunch route.

I got to Grandma's Bundles at eleven fifty-two, exactly in sync with another volunteer. She was a skinny, ragged-haired woman of fifty or so, and she sniffed the air gratefully. "Just smell that tarragon," she said approvingly. "Just *smell* that nutmeg and lemon. It's stewed chicken day, sure

enough. And of course it's pie day. Tuesdays is always pie day."

"Is they?" I said, and corrected myself. "I mean, are they?"

"Sure enough," she affirmed. "Every Tuesday Grandma bakes a cute little apple pie for each client, and, man, does them old folks love them apple pies! She's a saint, that's what Grandma is. Baking all them cute little pies for all them nice old folks, giving all us ex-cons a chance to prove ourselves—a saint, pure and simple. What was *you* in for, honey?"

"I wasn't," I said, startled. "That is, I'm glad to meet you, but I'm just covering this route to help my uncle, Eddie LaRue—he's sick. You say Grandma helps lots of ex-cons?"

"Sure enough," the ragged-haired woman said, pumping my hand. "Visits us in stir, gives us cookies, gives us hope, gives us a nice, painless way to work off our community service. So you're Eddie's niece? He's a world-class felon, Eddie is. Your whole family must be real proud of him."

"Absolutely," I said a little numbly, and we walked into Grandma's Bundles together.

George Folis was standing in the middle of the high-ceilinged room wearing a T-shirt and overalls again, his hair now de-Brylcreemed, shouting orders at volunteers. "Red ribbon—regular! Blue—diabetic! Green—vegetarian! White—no lactose! Get it right, and don't take no extras!"

Grandma bustled out of the kitchen just then carrying three more white-ribboned baskets,

wearing a crisp calico apron this time. My ragged-haired companion winked at her.

"Pie day, Grandma!" she exclaimed. "Tuesdays is always pie day! Did you make some extra pies for us?"

Grandma beamed. "Of course I did. Could I forget my sweet volunteers, the people who make all our good works possible? There are your pies—nice big ones—on the center table."

My friend darted to the center table and snatched the crispiest-crusted pie eagerly. "Thanks, Grandma," she said. "It's a good thing you always bakes up these extra pies for us. Otherwise, we might be tempted to dip into the old folks' baskets and—"

Grandma turned sharply to face her. "Don't even joke about that, Delilah. You know that's our first rule—the baskets are to be delivered exactly as you receive them. Our clients are given precisely the amounts of food they need to stay healthy. If I ever suspected that you'd tampered with a basket, that you'd taken anything or even touched anything, you'd be out, and your parole officer would be notified."

"Hey, I'd never do that, Grandma," Delilah said, suddenly near tears. "I was just jokin' around. I was just—"

"Oh, I know, dear." Grandma's face and voice went sunny again, and I swear every volunteer in the place sighed with relief. I know I did. "I just don't find that subject humorous. Our work is so important—so sacred, really—"

that I can't joke about it. Now, then! Take your baskets, everyone!"

We all loaded up. As I came back for my second batch of baskets, Grandma drew me aside. "How was your first day, dear?" she asked. "Any problems?"

"Oh no," I assured her. "I enjoyed it. The people on my route are so friendly and so interesting. This is wonderful work you're doing, Grandma."

Her eyes misted happily. "Thank you, dear. And thank you for calling me 'Grandma'—that always makes me feel so special. I have no grandchildren of my own, you know. I never took time to marry and have a family. My life was always nothing but work, work, work, always with the idea that I'd retire in comfort, free to travel the world. And when the time to retire came—well, I found that travel grows depressing when you know you'll be returning to an empty house, and comfort means little when you've no one with whom you can share it."

I nodded, my heart aching for her. "Well, now you're bringing comfort to many, many people, Grandma, and you've got a huge family. Everyone who works with you adores you."

"And I adore all of them," she said, laughing lightly. "And my life is still work, work, work—but it means so much more now that I'm not working just for myself. Well, dear! You'd better be on your way. Your dear people are waiting for their lunches.

And, oh! Don't forget to take a pie for yourself. I want *all* my wonderful volunteers to enjoy my pies. It's the very least I can do for you sweet people."

Obediently I scooped up another batch of baskets and a fragrant, flaky-crust apple pie. The first six deliveries went smoothly and pleasantly as they had yesterday, and then I came to Restful Harbor Retirement Suites. Green ribbon for Mrs. Howe, I reminded myself, and white for Mrs. Baxter. I braced myself as I rang the doorbell of suite 202.

But Mrs. Howe didn't seem to be in a belligerent mood today. She came to the door in her purple and gold housecoat, leaning lightly on her cane, smiling sweetly. "How nice to see you again, Harriet!" she said. "Just set the basket down on the coffee table today, would you? *The Maltese Falcon* is coming on in a few minutes—I'm going to watch TV while I eat. And could you be a real dear and do a tiny favor for me? I've got some very fine cut glass bowls and vases on the top shelf of my kitchen cupboards. There's no point in holding onto them now—I never use them. I've been thinking I'll sell them; I could use the money. Could you get them down for me? I'd have to stand on a chair to reach them—and as you can see, I'm not really—"

"Oh, of course, Mrs. Howe," I said readily. "I'll be happy to do that. Just show me the cupboard."

She led me into the kitchen and pointed out the cupboard, then glanced at her watch. "Oh dear—my movie's about to start. I'd better go turn it on. Just set the things on the counter, dear. It won't take you five minutes."

Actually, it took me at least twice that long—sixteen bowls and vases, each so obviously valuable that it had to be handled with slow, gentle care. I pulled over a kitchen chair, grasped each item separately with both hands, stepped down from and up onto the chair sixteen times. I replaced the chair and walked into the living room, to find Mrs. Howe on her couch leaning forward eagerly so as not to miss even one of Humphrey Bogart's slurred syllables. Her green-ribboned basket sat on the coffee table next to her, still unopened. I smiled.

"The bowls and vases are all waiting on the counter, Mrs. Howe," I said. "They're lovely—I'm sure you'll get a good price for them. Now, don't forget to eat your lunch."

"Oh, I won't, dear," she said, smiling brightly. "I didn't rest well last night—there was a kind of fighting in my heart that would not let me sleep—but I feel much better now. This is not near my conscience, and that's a fact. So just watch out for those falling sparrows, and thanks a bunch, Horatio."

Harriet, I thought—but for a senile old lady Horatio was pretty close. I nodded goodbye, picked up the white-ribboned basket,

opened the door, and saw Mrs. Baxter standing in the hall leaning on her walker.

"You're late again, Harriet," she said, smiling—but it was a strained smile. "Did Gladys delay you with more nonsense about Brown-earthers?"

"No, she just wanted me to help her get some cut glass bowls and vases down from a high shelf," I said. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting again, Mrs. Baxter, but Mrs. Howe really needed my help. She's going to sell those things. I think she's short of money, and I felt I couldn't—"

"Oh, of course," she said, smiling more naturally now. "You're a sweet girl—it was nice of you to help poor Gladys. It's just that I *do* get rather hungry, and Gladys *does* tend to delay volunteers with her nonsense."

"Then I'll tell you what," I said, setting her basket down on her coffee table. "From now on I'll deliver your basket first. That way, if Mrs. Howe wants to chat, at least I won't be keeping you waiting."

"Oh, what a clever solution," she said, beaming. "Thank you, dear. That would be lovely."

I said goodbye to her and headed for the street, a little apprehensive. But there was no George Folis looming across the street today, no Gladys Howe watching silently from her window. A nice, uncomplicated series of deliveries, I thought, and drove back to Woodhouse Investigations.

The Woodhouses, still at the

lunch table, invited me to share their olive and onion omelette, and I invited them to share the apple pie Grandma had given me. When the Professor once again asked me to tell them every detail, I once again complied, telling them all about the ragged-haired ex-con, the stewed chicken, the pies, the cut glass bowls and vases. They both nodded and munched steadily as I spoke.

"An exceptionally fine pie," the Professor observed. "So Mrs. Howe seemed in a better mood today. Did she say anything more about Brown-earthers?"

"Not a word. She seemed perfectly normal." I paused in mid-munch, considering. "Well, she did say some odd things right at the end. I think she's having health problems—she said that last night her heart was beating so hard that she couldn't sleep. And she said something about her conscience and something about falling sparrows, and she called me Horatio."

The Woodhouses exchanged a questioning look. "Horatio?" Miss Woodhouse asked.

I shrugged. "Well, it's the same general sound as Harriet. I guess she got confused. She was watching a Bogart movie, and she was focused more on him than on me."

"Perhaps." Professor Woodhouse closed her eyes and pressed her hand against her forehead, concentrating. "She used to be a drama instructor and an amateur actress, you told

us. And yesterday she called meat-eaters 'carrion kissers'—that's *Hamlet*, too. And today, Horatio. Let's see now: a beating in the heart, conscience, the fall of a sparrow. Act V, I believe, after *Hamlet*'s played his little trick on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the nasty things. Iphigenia! Fetch the Bard!"

Miss Woodhouse was already halfway to the bookcase. She came back with the well-worn volume of Shakespeare and waited patiently while her mother found the scene. "Ah yes," the Professor said. "Heart, sleep, conscience, sparrows, Horatio. It's all here. Harriet, I must meet this Mrs. Howe, immediately. She seems quite literate and clever, and I believe she's up to something. Fetch my shawl. Are you coming, Iphigenia?"

"Of course I'll come," Miss Woodhouse said, frowning, "but *you* shouldn't. I have a bad feeling about this, Mother. Something's going on—I don't know what it is, but I'm afraid it might be dangerous. I have real misgivings about it."

"It is but foolery," the Professor said, smiling, "such a sort of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman—but not *this* woman, rest sure of that. Harriet, introduce me to Mrs. Howe as your great-grandmother. Say I was intrigued by your description of her cut glass pieces and am thinking of purchasing some—as indeed I might. Iphigenia will play the part of my

maid. Come, Iphigenia! Why do you dawdle? Readiness is all!"

Twenty minutes later we were at Restful Harbor Retirement Suites, standing outside suite 202, and my finger was cramped from pressing the doorbell. I turned to the Woodhouses, worried. "I don't get it. I was here barely an hour ago, she was all wrapped up in watching *The Maltese Falcon*, she hadn't started her lunch, and she was wearing her housecoat. She sure didn't look like she was planning to go out soon. Why doesn't she answer?"

"An excellent question," the Professor said, and reached into the enormous purse she'd woven from old panty hose, drawing out a tiny embroidered case. She opened it to reveal an assortment of picks and wires and shrugged in apology. "Extreme times, extreme measures, et cetera. Silence while I concentrate."

In less than a minute the door was open, and I gasped in dismay. There was Mrs. Howe lying on the floor dressed in a neat navy blue suit, a crisp white blouse, sensibly thick navy blue shoes, and an elaborately feathered pink hat, her patent leather navy blue purse lying open a few feet away from her, an ugly purple bruise on her forehead.

"No!" I cried, and ran to her. I knelt by her side, seized her wrist, pressed down hard, felt nothing. "Oh my God!" I said. "She's dead!"

Suddenly the Professor was at

my side, plucking a feather from Mrs. Howe's hat, shoving it under her nose. "The feather stirs," she said. "She lives. Harriet, cover her with my shawl. Iphigenia, toss me that throw pillow and call 911."

She called and we waited. Probably it was just a few minutes, but it felt as if we waited a long, long time. The Professor did her best to make Mrs. Howe comfortable and was rewarded with a soft low moan. Miss Woodhouse paced.

"Harriet, come look at this," she ordered, and I joined her at the coffee table. She pointed at the green-ribboned basket still sitting there and at a modest array of thermal dishes. "Didn't you say Mrs. Howe is a vegetarian?"

"That's right," I said, confused, nodding. "A very enthusiastic one. That's why her basket has a green ribbon."

"A clumsily tied green ribbon," Miss Woodhouse observed. "Sloppily tied, perhaps hastily tied. Didn't you notice that? You described Grandma's ribbons as crisp. And if Mrs. Howe is a vegetarian, how do you explain that?"

She pointed at a low, deep thermal dish filled with tarragon-laced sauce, thick slices of carrot, slivers of onion and celery, cubelets of potato—and chunks of chicken. I cringed. "Oh no. Grandma made a mistake. She sent Mrs. Howe an order of stewed chicken. Well, that explains everything. Mrs. Howe

would never eat meat. When she saw that chicken, she must have gotten really mad. So she put on her suit, and she got her purse—she must have been planning to go straight to Grandma's Bundles to complain. And she was very upset, so she didn't pay attention to what she was doing or where she was going and she fell. *So that's how it happened.*"

"Maybe."

Miss Woodhouse crouched down to get a closer look at the coffee table. "Fragments of crust—Tuesday, as we know, is pie day. But these are large fragments, not mere crumbs. It's as if Mrs. Howe ripped the crust off in sizable hunks. But the pie plate is devoid of apple residue. Did she lick it clean, do you suppose?"

I was out of my depth, and I knew it. "I suppose?" I said.

"I do *not* suppose." She scowled and stood up. "Hamlet switched the letters—that's how Guildenstern and Rosencrantz got their come-uppance. And now we have this sloppy green bow. Harriet! Something is rotten in the state of Maryland!"

At three oh-five I dialed the number for Grandma's Bundles. George Folis answered. I asked for Grandma and heard distinct sounds of scowling and spitting. Then Grandma came to the phone. "Yes, dear Harriet?" she said.

"Oh, Grandma," I said. "I have dreadful news. It's poor Mrs. Howe—you know, the vegetari-

an in 202 at Restful Harbor. Well, I delivered her basket right on time—everything seemed fine, she didn't say even a *word* about Brown-earthers, she was *much* nicer than yesterday—and then I delivered Mrs. Baxter's basket, and she was very nice, too, but of course she always is. Then I went home, and I had lunch with my great-grandmother, and I told her about Mrs. Howe's cut glass, and Great-grandma was very interested—I think my Uncle Eddie told you about her last car-chopping job, I think you know she has some extra cash on hand right now—and anyhow, Great-grandma told me to go back to Mrs. Howe's place and ask how much she wanted for the cut glass, and oh, Grandma! She didn't answer the doorbell so I tried the door, and it wasn't locked so I pushed it open, and there was poor Mrs. Howe on the floor, and at first I thought she was dead!"

"At first?" Grandma said. "What do you mean, at first?"

"I mean at first," I said. "I mean, I felt for a pulse and there didn't seem to be one, but then I shoved a feather under her nose—she was wearing a big feathered hat—and the feather stirred and oh, Grandma! I knew she was still alive! So I called 911 and the paramedics came and they wanted to take her to the hospital, and by now she was more or less conscious and she refused to go. I mean, she *refused*! I begged her, and the paramedics begged her, but all

she could say was no. So they bandaged her up and we got her to bed. And she's still in bed, and she's mumbling nonsense about Brown-earthers and Q vitamins and all this other silly stuff that I can't *begin* to understand, and I don't know *what* to do. I mean, I've got to get back to work or I'll lose my job, but I *can't* leave her alone. Please, Grandma, help me."

There was a long pause. "Why, of course, Harriet," Grandma said at last. "You're a dear, you've gone above and beyond, but you shouldn't have to handle all this on your own. Ten more minutes, dear. Ten more minutes and I'll be there, and you can go back to your job. George can manage things here."

"Thank you, Grandma," I said, and hung up.

She was there in eight minutes, pressing daintily on the doorbell, a discreet brown bag in her hand. "Here I am, Harriet dear," she said. "And where is poor Mrs. Howe?"

"In her bedroom asleep," I said, pointing.

Grandma walked over and peeked past the half-open door at the stocky, greyhaired figure lying in the bed, her face to the wall. She clucked her tongue in compassionate disapproval. "The poor old dear! I understand why she didn't want to go to the hospital—I hate the place myself—but she should have realized that by refusing she was imposing dreadfully on you. Well! You've done more than your share of

good deeds today. Your poor nerves must be shattered." She opened her brown bag and pulled out a bottle of brandy, unopened, full to the brim. "Now, before you go back to work, you must have a sip or two, to settle yourself."

I shook my head. "Thank you, Grandma, you're very sweet, but I need to get back to work, and since I'm driving—"

"Oh, nonsense." Already she was in the kitchen taking two large cut glass goblets from the cupboard. "A sip or two won't make you unfit to drive. And I quite frankly need a drop, and I don't like to drink alone—it's a sure step on the road to ruin."

So she poured generous amounts of brandy into the two goblets, I sat down on Mrs. Howe's couch, Grandma settled into the chartreuse-slipcovered armchair directly across from me, and we drank to Mrs. Howe's quick recovery. "Tell me, Harriet," Grandma said. "You said poor Mrs. Howe was mumbling nonsense for a while. Do you recall just what she said?"

"Nothing coherent." I took another sip of brandy, finding it dusky and warming and very, very good. "She said something about her pie and something about Q vitamins and something about ribbons and something about needing to tell. She was very worked up—I had a hard time getting her to relax and go to sleep. Well, Grandma, thanks for the brandy—it *did* settle my nerves. But I need to get back to work now."

"No, dear Harriet," Grandma said, smiling sweetly. "You need to finish the brandy I poured you—it doesn't do to waste good brandy. And then you need to drink a great deal more."

"I can't," I said, surprised. "I'm driving, and I have to get back to work, and—"

"No, you're not," Grandma said gently, pulling a small revolver from her purse and pointing it directly at me. "You're not driving anywhere, and you're not going back to work ever again. You're going to drink several large glasses of brandy and then you're going to swallow some tiny pills I'll give you, and then you're going to drift into a sweet, restful sleep. This really is the pleasantest way to do it, Harriet. I could shoot you, of course, but these are small bullets—I might have to shoot several times, and that would be very painful for you, and I'd have to dump your body in the river. Not a nice way to go, is it? Heaven knows what nasty things the fish and seagulls might do to you before you were found. This way you'll be found curled up prettily right on that couch, and the police will just think you had some unfortunate habits and overindulged after the stress of the day. That isn't so bad, is it?"

Shocked, I started to set my glass down, but Grandma waved her gun reprovingly and I took another sip. "But why, Grandma?" I asked, my voice shaking. "Why are you doing this?"

"Well, I can't very well let Mrs.

Howe live, can I now?" she said reasonably. "She's a foolish old lady, but she might get someone to believe her nevertheless—I'll have to slip her pillow over her face later and press down a bit. And you—well, I'd hoped I could just let you leave, but since she spoke to you about the pies, I'm afraid I really can't."

"The pies?" I glanced at the large fragments of crust still littering the coffee table. "What's wrong with the pies?"

"Not a thing," Grandma said, offended. "Organically grown apples, no pesticides, very little sugar—they're perfectly healthful, and each of my clients gets one every Tuesday. Except my lactose-intolerants. They get their pies with a difference. And Mrs. Howe was very nosy and very naughty—she was paranoid, poor dear, full of silly conspiracy theories and always snooping. I'd guess that sometime ago she saw something that gave her suspicions a focus. So today she must have switched the ribbons on the baskets and gotten Mrs. Baxter's pie."

Just as Hamlet switched the letters on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, I thought, looking at the clumsily tied green bow. So that's what Mrs. Howe was doing while I was getting those cut glass vases and bowls down for her. I took a swig of brandy. "I don't understand. What was in Mrs. Baxter's pie?"

Grandma shrugged. "Just a few little packets. Cocaine, amphetamines, things of that sort.

You needn't concern yourself with the details. All you need to know is that they were things Mrs. Howe shouldn't have seen. So when Mrs. Baxter opened her basket today and discovered eggplant stew in her thermal dish, and actual apples in her pie, she knew what Mrs. Howe must have done. She called me, and I sent that fool George Folis over here to deal with things. Well, he recovered the packets—Mrs. Howe had them in her purse, she must have been planning to go to the police, or perhaps the Environmental Protection Agency—and he rapped her head against the coffee table and came back and assured me she was dead. That fool! I'll need to find a replacement for him, I can see that. Here, dear. I'll refill your glass. And do drink up. I haven't got all day."

She gestured with her gun again, so I drank. Already I was feeling woozy—that much brandy that quickly is not a good idea. "So that's what Grandma's Bundles is," I said. "A drug delivery system. You put the drugs in the pies, you pass them on to elderly lactose-intolerant dealers—"

"Well, they're not *really* lactose intolerant," Grandma said patiently. "Not all of them. Joan Baxter is—that's how we got the idea back when we were doing jigsaw puzzles in the Silver Citizens' Center, bored out of our minds. My other white ribboners have to buy their milk on the sly. Just drain the glass, dear. You'll

be less afraid if you drink more quickly."

I drained my glass, and she refilled it. "So these elderly dealers get the drugs," I said groggily. "And I bet they give them to all those young dinnertime volunteers to sell at high schools and colleges. And the money comes back with the dirty dishes, doesn't it, and no one suspects a thing. Who could suspect Grandma's Bundles?"

"No one," Grandma agreed placidly. "As a precaution, of course, I use ex-convicts on the lunch routes—all of them eager to work off their community service, none of them bright enough to realize they're delivering more than lunches. And if they should ever by chance be caught with the drugs, who would believe they got the packets from *me*? I meet plenty of volunteers on my Sunday cookie-trips to jails and prisons—which once again proves, dear Harriet, that good works bring rewards."

"Is that how you met George Folis?" I asked, my eyelids starting to droop now. "Does *he* know what's in the pies?"

"Well, of course he does." She glanced at her watch, frowned briefly, and poured more brandy. "George helped me get everything started. While he was nibbling on a cookie, shortly before his parole, George happened to mention that he knew of a wonderful—what *is* that term?—a wonderful connection. In prison he'd made some friends who controlled Megamarket, and they

had business associates in Colombia, but they were having problems with their distribution system. Well, Joan Baxter was having problems with her grandson—Brandon was quite a scraggly boy back then, all long hair and leather jackets and earrings, determined to make money in drugs but foolish about which people to trust. I knew quite a few bored older folks eager for extra cash, and Brandon knew quite a few younger folks just as eager. So I saw a way to solve all of our problems. Brandon and his friends cleaned up their appearance so as not to attract police attention; my friends bought wheelchairs and walkers. Grandma's Bundles was a godsend for all of us. Drink, dear."

I drank. "I still don't get it," I said. "I mean, you were a big success in real estate, right? You must have plenty of money. Why do you need more? You can't even have time to spend it. You spend every day stewing chickens and baking pies."

Grandma half smiled in embarrassment, acknowledging it. "I know. It isn't the sort of retirement I'd planned. But I found that I truly, truly enjoyed making money. It had gotten to be a habit, and I simply couldn't break it. My former custodian, Joe, was just the same. I took him into the business when I opened Grandma's Bundles, and he made a very handsome living just from taking the deliveries from Megamarket and helping me with other necessities. But

then he got greedy and started stealing packets for himself, and I had to have George deal with him and become my new custodian himself—a job for which, obviously, he is entirely unsuited." She glanced at her watch again. "Harriet, I have a splendid idea. If you're a *very* good girl and finish the entire bottle, maybe we needn't bother with those nasty old pills at all. Maybe you'd just agree to a tiny fall, and—"

"I don't think so." A new, clear voice cut through the growing muddle in my head. I managed to turn slightly and saw Miss Woodhouse standing in the bedroom door, her gun in her hand.

She pointed it at Grandma. "I have every word you've said on tape. Murder, attempted murder, drug dealing—you needn't waste any more time worrying about how to spend your retirement. Put down the gun—slowly—and put your hands behind your head."

Grandma frowned and pointed her gun more directly at my forehead.

"Well, well," she said, "what *shall* we do? You have a gun, but so do I, and I can't see any possible advantage to putting mine down. Perhaps we can come to some sort of arrangement. Who are you, dear? You obviously must know Harriet—are you her mother? Eddie LaRue's sister?"

In my heavily brandied state it took me a moment to figure out who Eddie LaRue was. Oh, that's right, I remembered. I'm supposed to be his niece. And then I

remembered the plan. If Grandma happens to bring a gun with her, Miss Woodhouse had said, I'll draw my own gun and engage her in conversation—and while she's distracted, you'll jump her and disarm her.

It had seemed a sensible plan at the time. I have a black belt, after all—I put in eight long years at Mr. Lee's Aerobic Kung Fu Studio to earn it—and I'm usually reasonably good at jumping people. But we hadn't expected the brandy. I breathed in through my nose, out through my mouth, and tried to remember a martial arts yell.

"Yowie!" I cried, and hurled myself forward off the couch, colliding heavily with the coffee table, knocking piecrust and stewed chicken all over the floor but somehow miraculously making it all the way to Grandma and ramming my head into her stomach, hard. She gasped, her chair tottered backward and bumped the wall, and the gun flew from her hands, landing near the front door. I collapsed on the floor and panted.

Miss Woodhouse frowned.

"Not very graceful, Harriet, but since you achieved your objective, I won't complain. Now, Ms. Morris, as I was saying—hands behind your head. And for your information, I am *not* Eddie LaRue's sister. I am—"

Things happened very quickly, and I perceived them very slowly, so I'm not sure I've got the next part just right. But I'm pretty sure that just as Grandma

was reluctantly putting her hands behind her head the door opened and a young man stepped in, stared at all of us, spotted the gun on the floor, and lunged for it. I had a split second to react.

God, I thought, is he cute. But he's probably too young.

So that was that. He got the gun. He pointed it at Miss Woodhouse and snarled. "Drop it, you old bag," he said.

Definitely too young, I decided. And too rotten.

Grandma sighed impatiently. "It's about time, Brandon," she said. "You were supposed to be here fifteen minutes ago with the pills—I was beginning to fear that by the time you arrived dear Harriet would be too drunk to swallow them. But all's well that ends well. Get the gun away from that other woman—I'd introduce you, but I don't know her name; I assume she's some relative of Eddie LaRue's. We'll persuade them both to take some pills—we'll make it look as if they were having a party—and meanwhile I'll deal with Mrs. Howe."

"You'll do no such thing," Miss Woodhouse said calmly, pointing her gun at Brandon now. They were standing at opposite ends of the room, each with a gun pointed at the other's head, with Grandma perched in her armchair halfway between them and me still sitting on the floor at her feet, rubbing my head, trying to get it all into focus. Geez, I thought. This is a tough one.

It got tougher. The front door

opened again, and in came Mrs. Baxter, her walker not seeming to slow her down much at all. She frowned at her grandson. "Brandon," she said, "why is this taking so long? I thought you and Valerie would have dealt with Harriet long ago. And who is that rather large woman standing in Gladys's bedroom door, and why does she have a gun?"

"I think she's Eddie LaRue's wife, or maybe his sister," he said, still snarling, "and I don't know where she got the gun, but I *do* know you've got to get it away from her. Don't worry. I've got you covered."

Mrs. Baxter frowned again. "I don't think that's such a good plan, Brandon," she said, and turned her attention to Miss Woodhouse. "Mrs. LaRue," she said, smiling sweetly, "there seems to be some regrettable misunderstanding here, but I think we can clear it up. Brandon and I have *nothing* against you and your niece, or your daughter, or whatever Harriet is. Perhaps we could consider a partnership."

"Don't talk nonsense, Joan," Grandma snapped. "We don't need any more partners."

Mrs. Baxter smiled at her. "I've been thinking I might like a *different* partner, Valerie. I've been getting bored with just sitting in my apartment all day while you hog most of the profits and make stupid mistakes like hiring custodians who steal drugs and bungle simple jobs like killing Gladys Howe. I've

been thinking that Grandma's Bundles could use a new Grandma and that I could fill that role quite well myself. And I'll just briefly point out that both Brandon and Mrs. LaRue have guns, but you have none. What do you think, Brandon? Is it time for us to take over the business? Mrs. LaRue and Harriet could help us."

Brandon's eyebrows were working double-time, crinkling and uncrinkling, arching and de-arching. He was evil as hell, obviously, but obviously not all that quick. "Sure, Gran," he said and winked at her before turning to look at Miss Woodhouse. "How'd you and your daughter or whatever like to be, like, our new custodians or something? I mean, we both got guns, and we both want Grandma Valerie dead, right? So go ahead and shoot her, and then you can work for us. We'll give you *lots* of money."

Miss Woodhouse pretended to think it over. "It's a tempting offer," she said, "but I'm not sure I can trust you. Why don't you put your gun down as a sign of good faith?"

He was starting to do it—he was that dumb—when the front door opened for the third time. Or maybe it was the fourth time. I don't know. I was drunk. I was losing count. Anyhow, George Folis was the one who stepped into the living room this time, and blinked, and tried to size up the situation. I wasn't happy to see him, and I certainly wasn't happy to see his .45.

"Hey, what gives, Grandma?" he demanded. "You were supposed to be back at the kitchen like a long time ago. I mean, I'm trying, but I can't handle regular lasagna *and* spinach lasagna *and* no-cheese lasagna, not all at once, and the lettuce-spinner thing got busted, and I can't find the oregano, and—"

"Shut up, you fool," Grandma said sharply, "and start shooting people. Mrs. Baxter and Brandon have betrayed us—they want to kill us both and take over the business. Harriet LaRue and her mother are in on it. Shoot them all!"

George Folis tried to understand and failed. He stared at me, stared at Miss Woodhouse, finally drew his wits together and spoke.

"LaRue never mentioned no sister," he said.

There was a loud, exasperated yell. I looked to the front door to see who the latest arrival might be, but the noise wasn't coming from that direction this time. It was coming from the bedroom. A moment later Professor Woodhouse stomped out wearing Mrs. Howe's purple and gold housecoat, grasping Mrs. Howe's heavy wooden cane. She stalked straight up to Brandon, not at all intimidated by his gun.

"You tiresome people!" she raged, shaking her fist at him. "Why must you keep arriving, turning on each other, causing foolish complications? In God's name, how many people can this room hold? I've had quite a suffi-

cient number of turns of fortune, thank you very much. I want *action!*"

She got it. Before Brandon could recover from his shock, she took her cane in both hands like a baseball bat, swung it around low, and swatted his knees mightily from behind. He bellowed in pain, buckled forward, and dropped his gun. It skidded across the uncarpeted floor and landed almost at the feet of George Folis, who blinked at it stupidly, picked it up, and blinked at it stupidly again. Now he had two guns, and he didn't know what to do with either of them.

"Shoot them, George!" Grandma shrieked. "Shoot everyone in the room, except me!"

Obediently George took aim at Brandon, who was lying hunched up on the floor and thus made an easy first target.

"No!" Mrs. Baxter cried. She picked up her walker with both hands, lifted it over her head, and hurled it at George Folis, hitting him square in the forehead. He fell flat on his back, out cold, and both guns went off simultaneously, both bullets plowing harmlessly into the ceiling. Now the Professor and Mrs. Baxter were in a race to grab the guns. It was amazing to see how quickly Mrs. Baxter could move now that she was free of her walker. The Professor moved amazingly quickly, too, but then everything she does is amazing.

The whole thing was so engrossing that I almost forgot

about Grandma until I felt her hard-sinewed arm hook around my neck from behind, pressing back, nearly squeezing the breath from me. Miss Woodhouse, who had been advancing toward us with her gun at the ready, stopped abruptly. Grandma yanked me to my feet, keeping my body in front of hers.

"Not another step, dear," she said to Miss Woodhouse, "or I'll strangle your niece, or your daughter, or whatever she is. And if you shoot, you'll shoot her as well as me. You wouldn't like that, would you? No, I didn't think so. So the rest of you can just deal with all your little problems, and Harriet and I will walk out of here. I have quite a bit of cash at home, I have a lovely little yacht, and I'm an excellent pilot. If you're wise, you won't call the police until Harriet and I have had time to get far, far away—and if she's a good, cooperative girl, I might just decide against knocking her on the head and dumping her overboard."

I gurgled for air and blushed harder than I gurgled. This, I thought, is humiliating. I'm drunk, yes, but I'm still a black-belt. I will not be taken hostage by a little old lady.

Her right arm was locked hard against my throat, so I grabbed the wrist—not enough to loosen it but enough to get some leverage. A powerful stomp to her right foot, a quick elbow blow to her rib cage, and I felt her grip loosen. I readjusted my weight, lowered myself slightly, and

pulled on her arm, lifting her onto my hip. Raising my right arm, I brought it under her armpit as a fulcrum and lifted myself up. Aim nicely, I reminded myself, and threw Grandma, hip first, over my shoulder. With a quiet gasp she landed lightly on the sofa. There, I thought. Just what I wanted—she won't even have a bruise. She was a drug dealer and a murderer, but she was, after all, an old lady, and my parents had brought me up right. I would have been miserable if I'd hurt her.

Miss Woodhouse raced to the couch, her gun pointed at Grandma's head. "See if Mother needs help," she said.

Of course the Professor didn't need help. Brandon, she told us later, had rallied briefly and pulled a knife on her, but she had quieted him with one solid punch to the face. By the time I reached her side, she had picked up the walker and used it to pin Mrs. Baxter against the wall. Mrs. Baxter squirmed helplessly in her tiny metal cage, cursing and shaking her fists.

Professor Woodhouse looked over at Grandma Valerie—the old fashioned dress, the soft grey bun, the twinkling blue eyes, the gentle mouth now twisted into a vicious scowl. The Professor sighed. "Hamlet is proved right yet again," she said. "The devil *doth* have power to assume a pleasing shape—and, evidently, to bake a first-rate apple pie. What a pity, Harriet, that you did not secure the recipe earlier

in the day. Now that you've flipped Grandma about so handily, it's unlikely she'll ever share it with us. Oh well. If it be not now, and it be not to come—let be.

"Now, I believe, it is time to summon the police."

It was an exhausting afternoon, an even more exhausting evening. After the police led away Grandma Valerie, Brandon, Mrs. Baxter, and George Folis, an earnest young sergeant asked the rest of us to come to the station and make statements. I hope he's thawed out from the frigid stare Professor Woodhouse gave him. We would, she informed him, do no such thing. Instead we would all go directly to Grandma's Bundles. He would station a small platoon of plainclothes officers there, to arrest the young dinner-shift volunteers as they arrived. He would send patrol cars to pick up the other lactose-intolerants on Grandma's list, send detectives to interrogate the mobsters at Megamarket. Meanwhile, we would cook.

She didn't even give me time to sober up. Of course, I knew she was right. Over a hundred shut-ins were waiting for their dinners. They'd had nothing to do with the drug business. They didn't know what had happened. They were just hungry.

And there was no one else left to feed them.

So Miss Woodhouse found the oregano and stirred up a sauce, I

boiled vat after vat of lasagna noodles, and the Professor sliced hefty hunks of garlic bread and tossed together an enormous olive and onion salad. By the time Eddie LaRue arrived to help with the deliveries, she was supervising the basket packing, making sure all dietary needs were honored, smacking Miss Woodhouse with a wooden spoon when she didn't tie the red and blue and green bows crisply enough.

I don't know how many delivery routes Eddie and I drove that night, how many baskets we hauled up and down narrow flights of stairs, how many cranky shut-ins scolded us for being late. All I know is that by the time I got back to Grandma's Bundles with the last load of dirty dishes, it was almost eight o'clock, all the lasagna and bread were gone, only a half-serving of salad was left, and I was feeling plenty cranky myself.

"So we pulled it off tonight," I said, listlessly spearing a wilted olive. "But we can't possibly do it every night, and every noon as well. Grandma's Bundles will have to close down."

"Nonsense," Professor Woodhouse said cheerfully. Her hands were moving busily, weaving pop tabs into a suit of chain-link armor that would, she assured us, protect us far better than any bulletproof vest. "I know a marvelous young woman—her name is Mildred—who was head cook at St. John's until unconscionable, unreasonable policies forced

her to retire at seventy. I shall call her tonight, and ask if she is willing to assume Grandma's culinary responsibilities. I suspect she will bound eagerly at the opportunity. Eddie will be the new custodian, I will oversee fundraising efforts, and Harriet will be the volunteer route coordinator. Mrs. Howe will help—I called the hospital moments ago and was told she is completely recovered from that nasty bump on her head, eager to be part of the resurrection of Grandma's Bundles. As for you, Iphigenia, you will recruit reformed felons to take over the dinner deliveries. I believe you are acquainted with a sufficient number of penitents?"

"I believe I am, Mother," Miss Woodhouse said, smiling as she scoured the Volvo-sized sauce pot. "It's a fine idea."

"Well, of course," the Professor said, sounding mildly surprised, mildly reproachful. "It is *my* idea, after all."

"That's very nice," I said, still cranky, "but it'll be harder than you expect to raise funds, Professor. This whole story will hit the newspapers tomorrow, and everybody will know Grandma's Bundles was just a coverup for a drug ring. This place'll be crawling with reporters. What are we going to tell them? Grandma's Bundles has a pretty ugly past."

"What's past is prologue," the

Professor began hotly, but Miss Woodhouse shook her head.

"Right poet, Mother," she said gently, "but wrong play."

"Oh, all right!" The Professor set down her pop-tab armor. She thought hard, then smiled.

"Dear Harriet," she said, "you may quite frankly tell the reporter people that the beginnings of this place are rooted in injustice. Tell them all beginnings are rooted in injustice—and if they doubt you, tell them to consult Plato. Then tell them to consider the irreproachable characters of the people now managing Grandma's Bundles and to consider the useful—even noble—purposes it serves. And tell them their contributions are welcome."

"That might answer *some* of their questions," I said, still out of sorts because my feet were so sore and my head was pounding so hard and my stomach was grumbling so much. "But they'll also want to know details about how the drug ring operated, and about George Folis's past, and about what's going to happen to Grandma. How do we answer the *rest* of their questions, Professor?"

Professor Woodhouse, shooting her daughter a smug glance, dipped once again into her bin of pop tabs.

"The rest," she said triumphantly, "is silence."

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July/August issue.

The last Channel boat of the day docked at Dover, and twelve passengers—six couples—lined up at Customs. They were a congenial group, having struck up acquaintance while waiting for the boat on the other side of the Channel. Observing them, Chief Inspector Clives again read the fax that had arrived from Interpol minutes before:

FEMALE, HAIR BLONDE, EYES BLUE, HEIGHT 1.7 METERS, AGE APPROXIMATELY 40. WANTED IN NAPLES FOR PASSING COUNTERFEIT TRAVELER'S CHECKS USING FORGED PASSPORT WITH NAME "MARTHA WASHINGTON" FOR I.D. REAL NAME UNKNOWN. LAST SEEN IN PARIS BOARDING 2300 CHANNEL BOAT BOUND FOR DOVER. ARREST AND HOLD FOR EXTRADITION TO ITALY.

This wasn't going to be easy, reflected Clives. All six wives were blonde, blue-eyed, and about the right height and age.

Just after they cleared Customs, one of the men—the one the others called Chet—asked, "Any ideas about a hotel tonight?"

"I've heard the Dover Empress is nice," declared one of the women. "What do you think, Mrs. Rouse?"

"Expensive?" asked the woman addressed.

"Not according to the listing in my Fodor's guide."

"If we're all agreed," said one of the husbands, "let's head for it. I need a good night's sleep before going back to Washington State."

As they struggled to the taxi stand with their luggage, Chief Inspector Clives quickly got into his own car and drove to the hotel. When the six couples registered at the desk, he noted that each couple came from a different state in America and was assigned to a different floor in the hotel, from 2 through 7.

Later, overhearing their conversations in the hotel dining room, he discovered that no two couples had vacationed in the same city. He learned further that—

(1) The lady from Texas is on the floor just below Alice and just above Mrs. Pander. They are married (not necessarily in order) to Abe, Bert, and Don. None of them visited Stockholm.

(2) The couple from Virginia have a room just below that of the couple who visited Madrid and just above Ellen.

(3) Clara is not married to Don, and neither has a room on the 7th floor. Ellen is not married to Fred, and Alice is not married to Abe.

(4) The couple who went to Rome have the room just below Edgar and just above Flora. Their last names are McDuff, O'Hara, and Queen.

(5) Bert is just below the Queens and just above Betty; she is on the floor just above the couple who visited Athens.

(6) Don, Mr. Norman, and Betty's husband include the men from South Dakota, Tennessee, and Utah.

(7) Doris was assigned the room just above the lady from Tennessee. Neither is married to Mr. McDuff.

(8) Clara has a higher room in the Dover Empress than the lady who vacationed in Belgrade.

(9) The couple from Utah are not on the 2nd or 7th floor.

Clives then knew the identity of the woman who had been in Naples:

Who was the blonde crook who passed the bad checks under the unimaginative name "Martha Washington"?

See page 106 for the solution to the May puzzle.

SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE EDITOR:

Can you use some help in working AHMM's logic puzzles? If so, Robert Kesling has come to your rescue. Send for "Solving the 'Unsolved,'" Kesling's clear, uncomplicated, 24-page compendium of explanations, examples, and tips. It easily shows you how most puzzles are solved. To get a copy, send your name and address, along with a check for \$1.50 for postage and handling, made payable to AHMM, to:

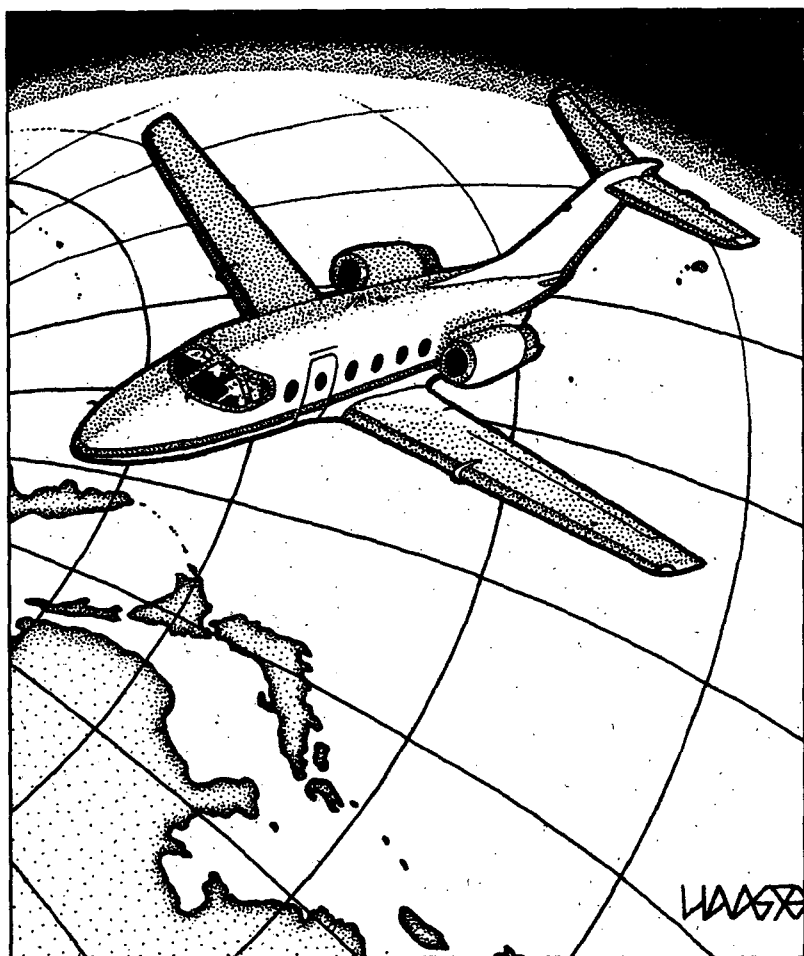
"UNSOLVED"

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FICTION

CAREERS

John M. Floyd



It was almost noon when Chicago detective Ed Parker entered the main terminal of Narita Airport. He was directed to a room off the south concourse, where he was greeted by Officer Tashiro Kasaki of the Tokyo PD.

"I know you're on holiday, Edward," Kasaki said, "but this is strange case. Involves three Americans." He held up a revolver in a plastic evidence bag, then turned and nodded toward a sheet-covered body on a stretcher. "That's one of them. Other two are suspects, held under guard in next room. Medical examiner's on his way."

Parker took off his coat and draped it over a chair. "What's strange about it?" he asked.

"One of the suspects, who always tells truth, says he killed victim. Other suspect, who always lies, says he did not. Very confusing."

Parker frowned. "Wait a minute. What do you mean, one guy always tells the truth?"

"He's a priest," Kasaki said.

"Priests don't always tell the truth, Socky."

"This one was Eagle Scout in his youth."

"Ah. I see what you mean. And he says he killed the guy?"

"Right."

"So you believe him?"

"What choice do I have? He never lies."

"What about the other suspect?" Parker asked.

"He always lies."

"So you said. How do you know?"

"He is used-car salesman," Kasaki explained.

"Well, actually, used-car salesmen don't always lie . . ."

"This one also studying to be lawyer."

"Ah. I see what you mean. And he says he didn't kill the guy?"

"That's right."

"So you think he did kill him."

"Right again. Because he always lies."

Detective Parker sighed. "That is confusing," he agreed. "What about the victim?"

"He's a schoolteacher from Los Angeles. At least he was."

"What else do you know about him?"

"Well, he owned the gun, for one thing. Also owned plane they came in. Private jet. The two suspects, old friends of victim, had been his guests on trip to Hawaii. He went scuba diving while they fished. On flight here today, the three were playing poker in main cabin when incident occurred. None of the crew were close by."

"When did all these things happen?" Parker asked.

Kasaki took a notebook from his pocket. "Let's see . . . They arrived in Honolulu from L.A. on seventeenth. Spent night at victim's beach house. Took boat out the next day, the eighteenth, when victim went

diving near Hanauma Bay. All three flew here today, the twentieth. Crew heard gunshot during flight, victim died shortly after."

Parker pondered that a moment. "A beach house and a private jet?"

"Correct."

"On a teacher's salary?"

"His son is a plumber," Kasaki replied.

"Ah. I see what you mean." The detective sighed again. "Okay, I'll talk to the suspects and take a look at the body. I'll also need to see the inside of the plane and interview the crew." He paused, thinking. "And see if you can get me a map."

"A map?"

"Of the Western Pacific." Parker walked over and opened the door to the adjoining room.

Ten minutes later he came out again and spoke with the M.E., who had arrived and was examining the body. Then he left the terminal, boarded the victim's aircraft, and took a moment to check the map Kasaki had provided him.

Finally, looking satisfied, Parker reentered the terminal. He found Kasaki at one of the west windows studying the distant white cone of Mount Fuji.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay what? Have you figured it out?"

"I think so."

"Holy Macao," Kasaki blurted. "You know who killed him?"

"Well," Parker said, "I don't think the priest did it. I realize that a holy man who's an Eagle Scout would always tell the truth, but in this case he was liquored up a bit. I don't think he knew what he was saying."

Kasaki shook his head in wonder. "A drunkard priest," he said, "who also plays poker."

"But not very well," Parker observed. "The cabin crew said all the chips were on the victim's side of the table."

"Maybe priest did kill him, then. For cheating, possibly."

"No, the bullet entered the victim's right side. According to the crew, the priest was seated to the left of the victim."

"So the salesman killed him?"

"Well," Parker said, "the salesman's exact words were 'For once I'm telling the truth: I didn't shoot him.' I agree that since he sells used cars and plans to be a lawyer, he would certainly lie, so the statement that he's telling the truth was in itself—"

"—a lie," Kasaki said.

"Right."

"So the salesman did kill him."

"Not exactly. He just shot him."



"What?"

"The coroner says the gunshot wound wasn't the cause of death," Parker said. "My guess is that he died from DCS. Decompression stress."

"You mean the bends? Like when you surface too fast from a deep dive . . ."

"Or fly too soon afterward. Especially at the altitude required by that jet."

Kasaki considered that, then said, "But there was plenty of delay. Victim went diving on eighteenth; flight here was on twentieth, two days later."

"That's right, it was—in calendar time. Real time, he lost a day." Parker held up the map. "In flying from Hawaii to Tokyo they crossed the international date line. The time between his dive and his flight was less than twenty-four hours."

Kasaki thought that over, nodding. "So he actually killed himself," he murmured.

"In a way. He was just careless." Parker was silent a moment, then picked up his coat. "Gotta go," he said. "I have a plane to catch myself."

"Home to U.S.A.?" Kasaki asked as they shook hands.

"Not yet. The wife and I are going to our place in Singapore."

Kasaki blinked. "On a detective's salary? You must have son who's a plumber, too."

Parker grinned. "A lawyer," he said.

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

David Passenbye, Baron of Lamsbrook, destroyed the beloved mice of Bertrand and Imogene Ruddistone, Viscount and Viscountess of Inglearn. For his treachery, the House of Lords stripped him of lands and title. Furthermore—and this was the cruelest punishment of all—he was permanently banished from the Tilford Mouse Club.

HUSBAND/WIFE	RANK	BREED OF MICE
Algernon/Jennifer Quilpen	baronet	Mot. Short-tail S-c.
Betrand/Imogene Ruddistone	viscount	Grey Tail-less Ang.
Charles/Margery Unterstead	duke	Grey Long-tail S-c.
David/Hildegard Passenbye	baron	Mot. Long-tail Ang.
Edmund/Letitia Thigwhistle	earl	White Short-tail Ang.
Francis/Natalie Oferwaite	knight	Mot. Tail-less R-c.
Gerard/Katherine Sandibank	marquis	Grey Short-tail R-c.

FICTION



For Shame's Sake

Karen Skowron



Calamity Jane got herself killed on a Friday, and less than a week later Myrna and me thought we had solved the case. Not proved it, mind you, but definitely solved it. Well, were we wrong.

Myrna called me with the news of the murder. I hadn't gotten to the radio yet, being busy in the garden. Our resident toad had startled me by blinking out from the grotto of ferns, and I lost track of time weaving together the drooped fronds and talking to him.

Myrna was "living out" at the time, taking care of two old twins who were sick of life and sick of each other but just too woeful to die. One of them had gotten a nuisance out-of-season cold, and Myrna'd agreed to live in for a bit. It was supposed to be for a week or two, but it was already nearly a month and she was becoming cantankerous herself.

"If no one ever bothered you, you'd never come in out of that garden," she chided me. "How do you expect to know what's going on in the world, in your own neighborhood, in fact?"

"I expect the bees would tell me if it were important," I told her calmly. "What's happened?"

She told me, but first she made me go get a glass of water with a bit of bicarb in it because she thinks I have a queasy stomach. I don't. I have a queasy heart, and soda is useless on it. But I ran the water and rattled a cupboard door and made drinking sounds before I picked up the

kitchen phone again. What Myrna can't see won't hurt her. I *am* the elder sister, after all.

She told me. Phyllis Carstairs had either fallen or been pushed down her basement stairs and a cement block dropped on her head.

"Whooooo-weee!" I breathed, sitting suddenly on a chair by the table. Maybe I should have really taken the soda.

"Are you all right?" she asked after a moment or so while she made deep breathing sounds she hoped I would follow. I did.

"Yes, of course," I replied. I wanted to remind her it was me who baited our hooks and put the poor fish out of their misery when we went fishing in the creek at the end of our street, but remembering how I did this, it did not seem a good time to mention it.

"Is Papa 'at coffee'?"

Since it was just on eleven, she knew he was. He walks downtown every morning, whatever the weather, and spends an hour or so with some other men in a café almost as old as he is. The coffeeshop, that is. He's ninety-two. Most of the other gents are "youngsters" in their seventies and eighties.

"Then he'll have heard. Don't give him jelly for lunch. Tell him we're out of it."

"You know darned well he'll trot back downtown and get another jar if I do that."

Papa has been having grape jelly on some sort of bread every lunchtime for thirty years or so.



For his dessert. Presently he's hooked on bagels. The problem is that if he is overly excited about anything—and the spectacular murder of a woman hardly a block away certainly qualified—the grape jelly seems to rile his body to match his mind and he can't sleep. And an afternoon nap is what keeps him healthy and me, and Myrna sane. Papa starts trying to rearrange our lives when he gets riled.

"I'll make him potato pancakes for lunch. He'll eat so many it won't leave room for much jelly."

"I'll drop by this afternoon, and we'll discuss this." I knew she meant the murder. Myrna and me have had some success with such problems in our town, well, city as it is now. Papa still calls it a village. The local police have some notion that we are psychic, and we have been right enough in the past for them to pay attention to us. It's more common sense than hocus pocus. But maybe that's what being psychic is all about.

I thought about Phyllis while I peeled and grated the potatoes (I added an extra for insurance). She'd moved into the neighborhood a year or so back, into the old Seymour house, which was on the next block over and down two houses. Our lots are still large and treed, so I can't see her property as I might in the new developments. She was a distant relation of Ernie Seymour, and because the closer relatives had

all died, she inherited the house. She lived there with a cousin who seemed a bit simple, but I think it was some medical problem that was controlled by drugs that kept her sort of dazed.

We called her Calamity Jane because from the very start she seemed to cause annoying ripples, and even tiny ripples in our old, established neighborhood reveal our intolerance of disruption, of change.

Little things like having the ancient yew hedge taken down when she hadn't been in the house a month. Ernie Seymour had planted that hedge himself with shoots he'd gotten from the Gilbert estate when the Gilberts still lived there. When she felt the outrage, silent and otherwise, Phyllis said she'd wanted light. I could have told her about careful clipping and pruning. She'd hacked down history, and there was resentment. And the place where the hedge had been was soon all nicely grassed, but it still looked like a scar.

Not a reason to push someone downstairs and . . .

I shuddered and got on with the pancakes.

Myrna came by at three and went straight to the pantry and got one of her famous cranberry loaves out of the freezer that still bothered Papa with its presence even though we've had it for twelve years. He claims things frozen acquire a funny taste, and even though he's long since refused to eat anything frozen, he still gets the taste in his mouth

whenever he spots the freezer. He eats quite happily the things we thaw out of his sight.

"I'll take this over to that cousin of Phyllis's—I never can remember her name—when I go back to the twins. And express our condolences." It was what we do in our neighborhood, but I couldn't remember the loss ever being so violent.

Myrna spread the cut slices out on a tray so they would thaw by the time she left. I knew she would then put the reassembled loaf in plastic wrap, so I went to the garden to get something to accompany it. It took a bit of thought, but I finally selected a stem of myrtle and some sweet cicely. I don't know what they mean in the language of flowers, but I hoped it was appropriate. I had considered rosemary (remembrance) and arugula (deceit), but they both seemed a bit insinuating.

Myrna had taken the tea tray out to the front verandah. I toss a bucket of water across its cement floor every morning in warm weather, and by afternoon, once the noonday sun has whisked around the corners and passed on, it smells sort of moist and gingery. Myrna says the smell reminds her of freshly ironed linen. Papa once said it was exactly like a rain forest. To Myrna's and my knowledge he has never been in a rain forest, but he does read a lot of *National Geographic*.

He was nicely asleep in his lounge chair out under the

maple in the side yard. We could just see his feet. Myrna nodded toward him and gave a relieved sigh.

"Seven pancakes," I told her.

Well, we sipped our tea and nibbled our cakes and dutifully ate our bowl each of yogurt. (The Seniors Centre had a woman speaking on the benefits of yogurt for the aging population, and Myrna and me had been so impressed—and intimidated by what could happen to us if we neglected all the goodies thus contained—that we had been having a bowl every day ever since. Papa refused to touch it.)

And we discussed the murder.

Myrna had a few facts like time of discovery (early this morning) and people involved (the cousin had found her), but it was too soon for any real details.

Papa must have gotten some gory tidbits from his cronies at the cafe, but he would have found it indelicate to pass these on to me. He had limited himself at lunchtime to admitting that he knew of the murder but was darned noncommittal when I tried to talk about it.

He was definitely riled but not to the point where he was going to want to change the furniture around in any or all of the rooms in the house (it's been where it is for fifty or so years, and that suits Myrna and me just fine) or tell me I ought to join some groups so I will meet new people. He seems to figure Myrna gets more than her share of exposure to the world in her "living outs,"



but as for me, I too often come across strategically placed brochures (he must pick them up in the library and save them for his tiresome times) for such as "Tol Painting with Thelma" or "The Historical, Architectural, and Graveyard Society" (even if we are a city now, we still are small and bunch things together).

Once when he was in a state he decided our cats needed to be belled because they were a menace to the birds. Our youngest cat was eleven years old at the time, so you'd think the birds would no longer be at risk. But belled the cats were. It was only when Old Tom managed to chew off the collar somehow and swallow the bell (or so we thought) and spent two days at the veterinarian that Papa gave up the notion. He can be irksome.

Myrna and me talked about the murder in the soft afternoon shade of the verandah while the bees joyed around collecting nectar. We don't really seem to come to our conclusions logically, which is likely why the police think there is something supernatural about our deductions.

We just kind of talk. And talk. And talk. And then something seems to come clear. Usually.

Well, that's what we did then. We discussed everything we'd found out about Phyllis since her arrival. Went over all the "calamities" that had occurred, the yew hedge and the rickety old car (there are likely financially distressed people in our neighborhood, but appearances are

kept up, and our understanding was that the house was bequeathed with funds sufficient for its upkeep and that of its occupants but Phyllis just didn't care how her car looked). The lack of church attendance. Any church. Her comments about spraying things with DDT (I agreed with her in *theory*, but when my Cox Pippins got in trouble, I admit it, I sprayed!). The plastic lawn furniture. The sheer curtains in the front windows where there'd always been lace taken down each spring and entrusted to the only authentic Chinese laundry in town.

We went over from different angles the reaction of all and sundry to these. There did not seem sufficient motive to do one's neighbor in.

That was Friday. On Saturday Aloysius Mason came by from the police to see if we had seen or heard anything or had any opinions. He's a captain or something on the force (he tries not to smile when I forget his rank, so I've stopped trying to remember—so annoying, these mental blocks of aging), and he is a very nice young man, somewhere in his mid-forties, I think.

He has at times referred to Myrna and me as the Brontë sisters, but I think he does Papa a disservice in this. Papa, over the years, has wanted Myrna and me to find true love and happiness with suitable gentlemen and move out on our own—he says that would leave the way clear for him to bring in some

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nice widow—but Myrna and me have never found anyone suitable. Papa has found many—he still does. And Myrna and me are now quite amused when he brings someone home that he considers son-in-law material.

I am the only one who calls Aloysius by that name—Myrna calls him Al or Officer Mason, I don't think she can remember his title either. I've never known anyone else by that name, I like very much the sound of it, and I take every opportunity to use it.

I had nothing to tell him, and he had nothing really to pass on to me that I didn't already know from the newspaper and Myrna and my own chats with neighbors. Except that Phyllis had died of a broken neck, likely when she fell. He told me this as I was picking a sprig of apple-scented geranium for him; his wife likes to chop it up fine in her gingerbread, the recipe for which she got from me, I am pleased to say.

My heart went into a quease, but I found myself commenting, "So why on earth would anyone drop a block? It almost seems like someone would have to be a bit insane."

"Have you someone in mind?" he inquired too quickly, even if gently. He is much too perceptive of my feelings.

"No, I haven't," I told him truthfully. I had no one in mind at all, and if I had someone in psycho, well, I wasn't aware of who just then.

I saw him have a word or two

with Papa, who was just coming back from his walk, but I knew Papa wouldn't tell me what was said. He calls Aloysius "that detective chap," so maybe we inherit our forgetful ways in this regard from him.

On Tuesday Myrna and I met in the park by the lagoon and admired the sun on the water and the sea birds while we had another marathon discussion.

Nothing.

On Thursday she came home at ten in the morning, just as Papa was leaving for the cafe, with her suitcase.

"Enough?" he inquired.

"Enough," she said firmly. She put the case at the bottom of the stairs for Papa to take up to her room. He would have been terribly offended if she had done it herself although she can hoist a bedridden patient singlehanded when she changes the sheets. I can, too, come to think of it. We both take after Papa. Substantial women is how a would-be suitor once referred to us. Papa never asked him home to tea again. I think he thought him a trifle.

Papa paused at the doorway and took his straw fedora from the hallstand. "You girls might think about the day of the week the murder took place. Refuse collection. I was just wondering about that."

We stared at him, and he gave a courtly nod as he went out.

Then Myrna and me stared at each other. Papa had never even acknowledged our little adven-



tures, let alone had any input into them. He seemed to think they were unseemly.

We discussed this for a bit, and then Myrna diffidently called the police station. Aloysius wasn't there, but she had a talk with someone else, who told her they were aware that Friday was garbage day and it had been checked into. "Well, so much for Papa Holmes," Myrna said, and we both giggled and I hugged her because it is wonderful having a sister.

"It could be a random act of violence," Myrna put forth at one point sometime later in our discussion. But it was simply to see if any little spark was felt at this suggestion—none was—and police opinion was that if it was for robbery the thief had panicked because nothing at all in the house was disturbed. Only Phyllis.

Just before lunch—I sat back and let Myrna do it all, she'd had nearly a month's break, if she wanted to go out and do for other people that was her business, but it meant I was then totally responsible for the home front—Myrna suddenly stopped mixing the tuna salad and said, "Rats!"

The spoon she was holding flicked at me with her emphasis and sent bits of tuna flying across the kitchen. She didn't notice, but Toby, one of our cats, went into action.

I caught onto her wavelength—is this what they mean by ESP? I suddenly had a clear memory of Phyllis's once saying,

"I'd drop a brick on it" when we were discussing rodents in the city. Myrna had said later that Phyllis obviously had no idea how *big* a rat was and how ineffective a brick would be. But maybe Phyllis had learned just how big a rat could be. And maybe she'd substituted a cement block. And somehow balanced it at the bottom of her basement stairs above some sort of area where rats gathered. Or where she enticed them. And maybe she had fallen down those stairs by accident. And the block had fallen on her head.

Myrna and me conveyed all this to each other with words but also some thought processes.

"It's awfully farfetched," she said.

"I know. A burglar would be far more believable."

"But we're both feeling there's something in this, aren't we? I mean, we'll have to check into it further."

Papa came home then, and we had lunch, this time on the flagstone patio outside the french doors. He did not ask if we had followed up the refuse collection comment. We talked of other things. He said he was tired of bagels and brought from his jacket pocket a longish bun he said was called a poorboy, and he wanted his jelly on this. It was a bit squashed—Papa is so fastidious about creased clothing, it amazed me that he didn't seem to mind his food wrinkled.

The poorboy was a definite replacement for the bagel. He ate



the whole thing with his jelly. Since Myrna was making the lunch, she cut the bun and spread jelly on it, and she and Papa got into a bit of an argument because she cut it in half and served him the bottom part. He said that was all well and good but it meant the next time, like right now, he had to eat an entire top half and he really would prefer it if she would cut it in half lengthwise and then crosswise because then if he only wanted half he would still get a top and a bottom both times.

Myrna swiped at the top of his head with her hand and told him he was an ornery old coot and to cut his own bread if he didn't like how she did it. He is very proud of his thick, wavy, white hair and smoothed it down again while telling her that daughters had no respect for their fathers any longer.

"I don't have to put up with that any more," she told him. "Even though the government sends me a check now to do so."

This caught Papa's fancy, and he hooted in delight. "So that is why you get a pension!" And he was still chuckling as he got a book and headed for his lounge chair, which he moved closer to the garage. It looked as if it might rain, and more than once in the past he had been awakened during his nap by raindrops; it was handy to be able to move under the overhang beside the garage.

Once the dishes were done (I dried and am pleased to report I

did so without comment), Myrna and me started out. I picked a bouquet of herbs with some daisies included and took them along.

We stopped to chat four times before we got along the block and around the corners to the Seymour place. It is that kind of neighborhood. Much of the conversation was about Poor Mrs. Carstairs (she had been That Mrs. Carstairs, but death does tend to bring on compassion; Myrna and me hadn't once referred to her as Calamity Jane since we heard), but a week had passed and life does go on and there was other news and events to catch up on. We did need a rain. The church bazaar was fast approaching, and it was said the promises for the bake stall seemed to be low this year.

No one answered the bell at the house where Phyllis had lived. The found-wanting car was not in the driveway. We looked at each other, waiting on inspiration. There seemed nothing to do except go home. Well, the bouquet would look nice on our table.

When we got around the corners again back onto our street, the Jamiesons were still pottering about in their front garden. They have a full-time gardener, but they like to keep involved even if it's now mostly strolling about and either admiring or criticizing the work. They are both old and frail. Not much older than Papa but they haven't worn nearly as well.





We were just going to give a small wave, having spoken with them on our earlier passing, but suddenly Myrna and me, as if attached, turned and stopped.

"Mrs. Carstairs' cousin wasn't there," I said. "I guess she may have gone. I don't expect she'll want to stay on in that house all alone."

The Jamiesons agreed and shook their heads but could offer no information as to where she had gone, or if she had. Then Myrna said, "I thought I spotted a rat as we came down from her verandah."

I was careful not to look at her. The Jamiesons expressed horror, and Mr. Jamieson nodded and said Poor Mrs. Carstairs had mentioned to him earlier in the spring that she was having a problem with rats (Myrna made a sound like a pleased squeak) and wondered if his old toolshed might be harboring them. Their properties were back to back. "My toolshed has been there for forty-four years, and we've never had rats," the old man said. "Would have told her that, but I got into an argument with her a year or so ago about my trees overhanging in her yard, and I didn't want to repeat that."

Myrna and me had a calming cup of herb tea when we got home—lemon balm, spearmint, and anise hyssop. We were practically shaking with excitement.

"We'll have to phone Sergeant Mason," Myrna said.

Well, it started to rain, and we went out and helped Papa move

his lounge chair, and then we had to stand on the back porch and just try to get enough of the smells the water from the sky called out of the earth. I used to lick raindrops off the edge of the pantry windowsill, but I haven't done that for awhile.

When we got back inside, neither of us felt like phoning just then. I'm glad we went with our feelings. Our stupendous theory was just that and would not have the dignity of being proved correct. We would have been a laughingstock.

What did happen was that Myrna and me decided to warm up our "cold feet" by going back to the Seymour house and testing our theory, checking the place at the bottom of the basement stairs.

We had absolutely no business being on the property. We had absolutely no right to act on our knowledge that the boarded-up rectangle on the far corner of the basement was actually a door and could be pried open and would give access to the basement. Myrna and me had discovered this many years ago when we played with the Seymour children (he had been killed in the war, she had died in a boating mishap off Australia). It might still open. It was worth a try.

The rain had eased, and the sidewalks smelled delicious, that warm, wet-cement fragrance. Myrna said one of her favorite sounds in the world was tires slapping on wet pavement.



I told her this sounded naughty, and we both giggled.

This time no one else was outdoors when we walked along and around the block, except we did wave to Mrs. Finn-Owen on her front verandah, who called out to us, "Now, don't catch cold, you two. You girls always were ones to go out in any weather."

Phyllis's place already looked unlivd-in, almost as if it were boarded up. As we went up to the house, we were silent and walked around it likewise. We stopped, startled to see Maisy Evans bending over in the back garden as if looking for something. She looked up, saw us, a look of absolute terror crossed her face, and she fainted.

We revived her, of course, Myrna having a fair knowledge of medical care what with her "living outs," where people less than healthy have given her a lot of practice over the years. We propped her up on the wet grass against a tree and fanned her face, and Myrna gave me a bit of a puzzled look when I hunkered and began to rub Maisy's wrists—the last time I had my teeth cleaned I read in a health magazine about chafing the wrists of fainters. I never expected to have a chance to use this new knowledge, it isn't a family trait. Papa doesn't believe in fainting.

Maisy opened her eyes and wiped her hands up and down on the legs of her slacks but she did not look at us or offer an explanation.

She'd grown up in the area but

had moved away when she married, then came back to town when her husband died. She now lived in a very nice condominium in the newer part of town, the section that had been developed in the sixties.

Finally she struggled to her feet and started across the yard toward the street. Myrna and me watched her walk along the sidewalk none too steadily, and in a few seconds we started after her. Her car was parked several houses down. When she stopped by the driver's door and put one hand up on the roof of the vehicle as if supporting herself, Myrna picked up speed until she reached her.

"I'll drive you home," Myrna said. Maisy just stood there. Myrna took Maisy's purse from unresisting fingers and handed it to me. I think she was worried Maisy might faint again, and she wanted to be ready to break her fall. I simply stood there and held the purse until Myrna gave me a frown and made a key-turning motion. I found the keys. Myrna led Maisy around to the other side and put her in the passenger seat. "Let's pick up our car," Myrna was saying but I had already thought of this and waited for her to open the back door for me.

At home Papa was in the wet garden busily picking the wrinkled peas—oh lord, they weren't at the proper plumpness yet, see what I mean about riled—and he stood up (he was wearing an old pair of hip waders that I'd



last seen hanging, scarily, in a corner of the attic at least twenty years ago) and watched me open the garage door, then glanced at the street where Myrna was behind the wheel of a stranger's car. I don't think he knew Maisy.

"You've got mud on your skirt and your left limb, I've noticed," he told me when I had backed out of the garage and lowered the window.

"I'll explain later, Papa," I told him and hoped to high heaven he would keep away from the strawberries. He was wearing the heavy rubber gloves Myrna and me use when we strip furniture, and around his neck he had on the plastic bib that was given out when the church had a lobster supper a few years back. He looked very odd. I began to fear he was getting a bit senile, but I couldn't worry about it then.

At Maisy's condo I found a visitor's space and then found my own way up to her flat. They had gone on ahead.

Maisy had sort of folded in on herself on the chesterfield. She looked quite ghastly. She likely wasn't even aware she was sitting on her lovely sofa in wet and dirt-stained slacks and blouse.

"I don't like to leave her like this," Myrna told me, "but she won't say a word. Maybe we should have taken her to the hospital."

Maisy finally spoke. "No. I'll be fine."

"What were you looking for?"

Myrna finally allowed herself to ask.

"Plants. Phyl said I could have some of her plants. Please go. I'll be fine."

Well, we did go. But only as far as the elevator.

"How does she know Phyllis well enough to call her Phyl?" Myrna wondered aloud as we stood there but did not press the button to summon the elevator.

"What was she looking for really?" I added to the question.

Myrna put her hands in her dress pocket to think better and suddenly gave me a huge smile. It didn't take her jingling for me to catch her delight. We both turned back along the hall and knocked on Maisy's door.

"Who is it?" she called out. We were standing well to the side of the peephole.

"It's us again," Myrna said. Then went silent so Maisy had to open the door. "I forgot to give you back your car keys," she said, taking them from her pocket and holding them but just out of reach. "And could Betsy please use your washroom? She has problems with, well, you know."

I tried to look the problem, and Maisy opened the door to us like one reluctant but unwilling to object. I scooted into the bathroom off the hall and left the door slightly open so I could hear what Myrna was up to as she followed Maisy back into the living room.

"I didn't know you knew Phyl-



lis before she came here," Myrna was saying.

"Did she tell you that?" Maisy asked in a half gasp. "Did she?"

Myrna did one of her pregnant pauses, and Maisy gave birth into it. "We both lived in Ottawa a long time ago. That was all."

I was then startled by a most unusual noise. It took me a moment, but then I realized I was hearing teeth chattering. I knew it wasn't Myrna. Her dentures would fall out if her teeth ever shook against each other like that.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" Myrna was saying as I slipped out of the bathroom and went along to the living room, where I sat down quietly on a chair just inside the room. Myrna was leaning back comfortably on the chesterfield. Maisy was standing by the window, her teeth clenched and the knuckles of her right hand pressed to her lips.

I had never seen my sister in such high form of spill-the-beans before; I'd been the recipient of it often enough but not an observer. It was fascinating. She gave the impression of such calm assurance, a safe port in a storm, tell Myrna and all your troubles will be over. She sounded so relaxed, but I could see her toes pushing against the tops of her soft leather oxfords and knew how tense she must be to grip them like that.

Maisy now started to shake, and Myrna stood up, put her arm gently around her shoulders,

and led her to the chesterfield, where she sat her down and wrapped an afghan that had been folded across the back around her shoulders.

Then she sat down a cushion away and waited. Myrna can wait up a vacuum. You sort of feel compelled to fill it.

It took Maisy a lot longer to respond than it would me, but then Myrna has had a lifetime of practice on me so I'm conditioned. "Was it an accident?" I suddenly heard myself asking, and gave Maisy the motivation to flow into Myrna's vacuum.

"Accident?" Maisy sounded as if she'd never heard the word before. "Accident," she said again in quite a different tone. "She fell down the stairs."

Maisy looked at us both and realized she had spoken and realized what she had said, that she had admitted to being there. She dropped her head and covered her face with her hands and all three of us sat in the eeriest silence. I couldn't help staring at Maisy's hands. They were large and strong and likely could easily pick up a cement block and . . .

I was about to say, "But why drop the block?" when Myrna intercepted my intent with a look that kept my mouth closed. So I increased the vacuum.

The double void was too much for Maisy. A week of living with what she had done must have been hell. It couldn't get any worse. She spoke into her palms.

"I took off my gloves when I came out of there, and when I



went to get them today out of my coat pocket, because it was raining, I could only find one. I thought I must have dropped the other one in her side yard. When I went out to the road along the side of the house. That's what I was looking for."

She looked up at Myrna and me. She could not find a reason to stop. "Phyl knew me in Ottawa in 1956 and knew when I had Carol."

She paused, as if that explained everything, but when she realized it did not, she gave the most awful smile, like one might who has said something irretrievably tactless. "Don't you see? We moved to a small town a year later, and I took six months off Carol's age. It worked. She was a small baby, a small child. I said she was born in June, not January. Later on, when she went to school, Alex altered her birth certificate. No one ever knew. We buried the past."

"Then Phyl moved here. I didn't realize it until a month or so ago when we ran into each other downtown. She recognized me after all those years. I had to do something. I had to do something. She might never mention it, but then she might. I had to. No one must ever question that Alex was her father. Begin to wonder, to guess. Carol must never know . . ."

That eerie silence again. My stomach was in such a quease. I didn't know what to do or say. Myrna reached out and put her hand on Maisy's shoulder.

Maisy looked at her. "An accident," she said. "It was an accident?"

"But why drop the block? If she fell down the stairs?" Myrna's voice was calm, but she had such sadness in her eyes and I likely loved my sister more than than I have in nearly seventy years of knowing her.

Maisy continued to stare at Myrna, and I could see Myrna's fingers rubbing ever so gently back and forth across Maisy's shoulder. Myrna has a soothing touch. She can put her caring across in her hands. I thought everyone could do this until I had an aunt try to calm me in this way many years ago and I realized the difference. I don't know if I can do it or not.

"Because I kicked her. In the face."

I closed my eyes to shut out the image, but this made it worse so I opened them again. I must have made a sound because Maisy turned her head to look at me and an explanation poured out. "I went there to talk to her, to ask her—I mean I couldn't just wait and hope she wouldn't mention it. I asked her and she—she laughed. She just didn't understand. We were standing by that back door—I wouldn't go in—and she, she laughed, in that way she has."

Maisy suddenly bent her head down and kept trying to clear her throat. I felt I had something caught in my chest, but I didn't know how to clear that. Myrna got up and went into the kitchen



and came back with a cup. Maisy took a drink and frowned. "Hot water," Myrna told her, and she drank it.

Myrna has this habit of drinking hot water straight from the tap—I am sure she is slowly poisoning herself. Lord knows what has built up on the inside of our water heater over the years. She thinks I am obsessive over this, and I have stopped commenting on her doing so because she also stopped telling me about when I was small and refused to drink milk for ages because I thought the insides of cows might be dirty. I personally think she made that up. I could ask Papa, I suppose. Well, I haven't. I let myself think of this while Maisy drank the water and Myrna sat down beside her again.

"I didn't push her. She fell. She had laughed and said what did it matter when Carol was born and who cared any more if babies were conceived before marriage—she just didn't understand. 'You always were a worrywart twit.' That's what she said to me. With that laugh. Then there was a funny noise from the basement, and she said oh damn the machine was stuck on its cycle again, the ancient old bugger, and she rushed along the hall saying her cousin slept like the dead but if she was awakened she couldn't go back to sleep again so she had to stop the machine. And she tripped at the top of the stairs. And she fell."

Maisy was nodding, reliving

it, reseeing it. I could see it, too. I didn't want to see the next part. Not at all.

"When I got downstairs, she was lying in a heap at the bottom. She was staring at me. All I could think of was 'worrywart twit' and how she didn't understand and how she could destroy Carol. How she could destroy so many of us. Ruin lives!" Maisy's voice was rising. "So I kicked her! She—"

Both Myrna and me at the same instant practically shouted, "Maisy!" Startled to silence, she looked from one to the other. Then she must have realized that she was the only one who knew if Phyllis had been alive or dead when she kicked her. And that it would make all the difference.

I didn't realize this then. It was one of those things that happen between Myrna and me.

Maisy said, "Oh." She sighed. "I guess I went a bit crazy when I did that. And then, when I—" she gulped, and I was afraid Myrna was going to leap up for another cup of water "—when I realized what I'd done, I couldn't stand to see it and I picked up a block and . . ."

The eerie silence again. Well, Myrna and me and Maisy might have sat there forever, none of us wanting to move, none of us wanting the next things that needed to happen to happen.

They did, of course. I eventually really did need to use the bathroom, and my getting up prompted Myrna to rise also.



She was waiting for me when I came out. Maisy was still on the chesterfield. I went over to her and pressed my cheek to hers, suede against suede. "It must have been awful," I said, and I'm not sure if I meant the last week or most of her life.

Maisy looked up at me, and neither of us closed down behind our eyes. "It was," she said.

Myrna and me got ourselves out into the hall and pressed the button for the elevator. "I don't want to think about it," I said. "I don't want to interfere in people's lives ever again."

Myrna took some deep breaths, and of course I did, too. We got into an empty elevator. "I don't want to think about who the father could have been or how it could have happened to have been so shameful." But I was thinking of many possibilities.

Someone tried to get on the elevator at the next floor, but I shooed them away with my hands.

"I refuse to phone Aloysius, you'll have to do it. We likely should have phoned him from

there. Oh, that poor woman. And what about Carol?"

We had reached the lobby.

"She'll get help," Myrna said.

"Oh, great consolation," I said.

Myrna was shaking. I put my arms around her, and we stood there, Myrna and me, hugging each other. Then we walked around the building to the parking lot. As we were getting into the car, I looked up and could see Maisy standing partway in the open door onto her balcony. "I hope she doesn't jump," I said.

Maisy raised her hand and waved slightly. We both waved back. "In a way I think she already has," Myrna said.

Maybe she was right. When we got home and Myrna phoned Aloysius, he told her Maisy had given herself up. And said he'd be by in the morning because he understood we'd been involved.

Myrna and me spent the evening shelling peas and topping strawberries. Mostly in silence, not our usual chitchat. And it was just on nine when I started upstairs to my room.

"I'm retiring," I said. And I hoped it had a double meaning.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# COMMON STOCK

Octavus Roy Cohen



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Gerald Corwin emerged from the elevator, glanced apprehensively about the ornate lobby of the hotel, and walked swiftly toward the dining room. But as he handed hat and cane to the checker, a huge, ungainly figure bulked before him, and a mild, pleasant voice brought misery where a moment before there had been contentment.

"Gonna eat now, Corwin?"

Gerald sighed resignedly. Too thoroughly a gentleman to display consciously his frank distaste, he was yet too poor a dissembler wholly to conceal it. He merely nodded and strode disgustedly in the wake of the obsequious headwaiter with Jim Hanvey waddling clumsily in the rear.

Corwin was disgusted with the whole affair, and particularly that phase of it which placed him under the chaperonage of the ponderous and uncouth detective. Not that Jim had been obtrusive, but the man was innately crude and Corwin despised crudeness.

One could readily understand his antipathy. The two men were as dissimilar as an orchid and a turnip. Corwin, about thirty years of age, was tall and slender and immaculate, shrieking the word "aristocrat" in every cultured gesture. He was unmistakably a gentleman, a person to whom aesthetics was all-important, and he could not fail to consider Jim Hanvey thoroughly obnoxious.

Jim was all right in his way perhaps, but never before had Corwin been forced into intimate association with a professional detective. He was resentful, not of the fact that Jim Hanvey was a detective, but because the man was hopelessly uncouth. Jim was an enormous individual and conspicuously unwieldy. He wore cheap, ready-made clothes that no more than approximately fitted his rotund figure. He smoked vile cigars and wore shoes which rose to little peaks at the toes. But Corwin felt he could have stood all that were it not for Jim's gold toothpick.

That golden toothpick, suspended as a charm from a hawserlike chain extending across Jim's vest, had fascinated Corwin from the commencement of their journey to Los Angeles. It was a fearsome, flagrant instrument, and Jim Hanvey loved it. It had been presented to him years before by a criminal of international fame as a token of sincere regard. Otherwise unemployed, Jim was in the habit of sitting by the hour with his fat fingers toying with the toothpick. Gerald had once hinted that the weapon might better be concealed. His insinuation resulted merely in debate.

"Stick it away? Why?"

"A toothpick—"

"Say, listen, Mr. Corwin; have you ever seen a handsomer toothpick?"

*From Jim Hanvey, Detective by Octavus Roy Cohen (Dodd, Mead). Copyright 1923 by Octavus Roy Cohen.*

"No, but—"

"Well, I haven't either. That's why I'm proud to have folks see it. It's absolutely the swellest toothpick in captivity."

No arguing against that, but from the first hour of the acquaintanceship Corwin reviled the fates which decreed that for two weeks he should be under Hanvey's eye.

The thing was absurd, of course. Corwin, fearless and no mean athlete, was well able to take care of himself and fulfill the delicate mission with which he had been entrusted—a mere matter of securing a proxy from Colonel Robert E. Warrington and returning with it to New York in time for the annual meeting of the stockholders. He was not a simpleton, and there was no doubting his integrity. Why, then, this grotesque and goggle-eyed sleuth?

Matter of fact, Jim had appeared wholly uninterested since their departure from New York. All the way across the country he had slouched in their drawing room, staring through the window with his great, fishy eyes. Those eyes annoyed Corwin. They seemed incapable of vision. They were inhuman, stupid, glassy eyes which reflected no intelligence. Corwin fancied himself the victim of a stupendous hoax; it was unbelievable that this man could rightfully possess a reputation to justify the present assignment.

The meal was torture to the fastidious younger man. There was no denying that Jim enjoyed his dinner, but the enjoyment was too obvious. Jim caught the disapproving glance of his companion and interpreted it rightly.

"Sall right, Mr. Corwin. Eatin' ain't no art with me. It's a pleasure."

Corwin flushed. Suddenly he discovered that Jim was not listening. Hanvey had turned slightly and was gazing into a mirror which reflected a section of the huge dining room. Corwin followed the direction of his gaze and saw that the object of his scrutiny was a man of medium size but muscular figure who was searching for a table.

Hanvey was interested, and as an indication of that interest he blinked in his interminably deliberate manner, lids closing heavily over the fishy eyes, remaining shut for a second, then uncurtaining even more slowly. And finally, when the newcomer had seated himself, Jim nodded toward him and addressed Corwin. "Yonder's the answer," he said.

Corwin shook his head in puzzlement. "To what?"

"Me."

"I don't quite understand."

"See that feller who just come in?"

"Yes."

"It's him."

Corwin inspected the newcomer with fresh interest. The man was

of a type, one of those optimistic individuals who futilely struggle to acquire gentility and who fondly believe they have succeeded. In every studied move of the man one could discern mental effort. Even the hypercorrect raiment was subtly suggestive of a disguise. There was nothing flagrantly wrong with the man, just as there was nothing quite as it should be. Corwin, himself not an overly keen student of human nature, could yet fancy the stranger's manner of speech—careful, precise, studied, stilted, rather malapropian, with here and there a moment of forgetfulness, with its reversion to downright bad grammar. He turned back to Hanvey.

"Who?"

"Billy Scanlan, alias Gentleman William, alias Flash Billy, alias Roger van Dorn, alias a half dozen other things. He's done time in Joliet and Sing Sing. He's a good friend of mine." The faintest suggestion of a smile played about the corners of Jim's mouth. "An' he's why your crowd hired me to trail you out here."

It was quite plain to Hanvey, but Corwin was puzzled. "I don't yet understand."

"You don't? Gosh, son, there couldn't anything be any plainer! We ain't never discussed what brought you out here, but I know all about it just the same, an' since you prob'ly won't answer no questions, I'll tell you what I know. The Quincy-Scott gang started a drive recently to grab off the control of the K. R. & P. Railroad from McIntosh and his crowd. Before McIntosh woke up, the Quincy bunch had corralled every loose vote, enough to give them a control in the forthcomin' stockholders' meetin'. When McIntosh got wise, he knew that his only hope was Colonel Warrington out here in Los Angeles, the colonel ownin' about ninety thousand shares of common stock. So he telephoned the old bird and found out that he wasn't interested in the fight one way or the other; that he'd already been approached by the Quincy-Scott combination an' had turned 'em down cold an' final, which seemed to indicate that with a little proper persuasion he'd be willin' to deliver a proxy to McIntosh. It bein' 'most time for the meetin', an' things bein' pretty desperate, they sent you out to get the proxy from the ol' gent, his proxy gettin' there meanin' victory for McIntosh an' its failure leavin' the vote control with Quincy an' Scott. Ain't it so?"

Corwin was staring at Hanvey in amazement. The pudgy detective had been speaking disinterestedly, casually, but he had the most intimate facts at his fingertips. Corwin nodded before he thought, then bit his tongue.

"I'm not at liberty to say whether or not you're correct, Mr. Hanvey."

"Sure you ain't. You're dead right, son. Don't you never spill no beans to nobody no time. I wasn't tryin' to pump you. I got the dope

straight from headquarters. I was just tellin' you so you'd understand that I know why I was sent out with you, an' so you'd understand, too."

Hanvey paused, and as though that ended the matter he extracted from an elaborately engraved and sadly tarnished silver-plated cigar case two huge black invincibles, one of which he reluctantly extended to his companion. Corwin declined, and Jim sighed relievedly as he tenderly returned the cigar to its place. He lighted the other, inhaled with gusto, and blew a cloud of the smoke into the air.

"I still don't understand, Mr. Hanvey."

Jim jerked his head toward Scanlan. "Billy's been sent out by the Quincy gang. His job is to keep that proxy from getting to New York in time for the stockholders' meeting."

"O-o-oh!"

Corwin's jaw hardened, his sinewy frame tensed, and a fighting light blazed in his fine, level eyes.

Jim grinned. "They ain't gonna try no rough stuff. That ain't Bill Scanlan's way of workin'. He's one of the smoothest con men in the known world, but he ain't rough—not Billy. He's smooth as butter."

"Then how—"

"Easy enough, son. He'll be on the same train that carries us back east, an' before we get to Chicago, he'll swipe that proxy. At least that's what he's figurin' he's goin' to do."

Matters were clarifying slightly in the brain of young Corwin. But his curiosity was still unsatisfied. "If I may ask, Mr. Hanvey, how do you know that he is the Quincy-Scott agent?"

Jim shrugged his fat shoulders. "Easy enough. Y'see, it's this way: When the good Lord manufactured me, he forgot to hand me out any good looks, an' he slipped me entirely too much figger. But he didn't find that out until too late, so what he did to make up for it was to give me a mem'ry. I've got a mem'ry like a cam'ra, son. I just naturally don't forget things, an' I've sort of built up the rep of knowin' more professional crooks than any other ten men put together. McIntosh knew that the other crowd would engage a professional crook to get the proxy away from you, it not bein' no job for an amachoor. He was sure to foller you out here, an' the way he was plannin' to work was to scrape an acquaintance with you, you never suspectin' nothin', which would have made things pretty easy for Billy. I just trailed along to sort of point out to you the feller you wasn't safe with, an' Billy Scanlan is him."

Gerald Corwin felt a fresh respect for the fat man with the bovine expression, and a bit of his resentment vanished at the same time, for he now understood one or two things which before had left him wholly puzzled and more than a trifle resentful.



They finished their meal in silence. The check paid, they rose and started from the dining room, but Hanvey took Corwin's arm.

"C'mon over an' lemme introduce you to Billy. It'll sort of make things easier for him, bein' introduced formal-like, an' the poor feller's got a tough enough job on his hands as it is."

Startled but obedient, Corwin followed, and he saw the expression of incredulous amazement, not untinged with apprehension, which flashed into Scanlan's face as they paused by his table.

"Hello, Billy!"

Scanlan rose slowly. His jaw was set, and it was plain that he was struggling to orient himself to this bizarre situation. He strove to make his tone casual. "Hello, Jim!"

Hanvey was exceedingly gracious. "Lemme introduce my friend Mr. Corwin. Mr. Corwin is the feller you was sent out here to watch, Billy. Mr. Corwin, shake hands with Mr. Scanlan."

Awkwardly the two men—one an innate gentleman and the other a student at the school of gentility—shook hands. Corwin was a trifle sorry for Scanlan. The man seemed afraid of Jim Hanvey.

"I'm pleased to meet Mr. Corwin."

"Sure you are." The voice of Hanvey chimed in genially. "Didn't you come all the way from New York just for that? An' wasn't you wonderin' how you was gonna work it? That's me—always ready to help out a friend, Billy—so I up an' introduces you fellers."

"It's real kind of you, Jim—" Scanlan was choosing his words with scrupulous care—"but I don't quite—er—comprehend what you're driving at."

"No?" Hanvey's bushy eyebrows arched in surprise. "I'd sure hate to think that you wasn't tellin' me the truth, Billy."

"I really don't understand your—ah—innuendoes. I'm in Los Angeles on a vacation and without no definite objective."

"Sure, Billy, sure! I know that. You're a gent of leisure, you are. But if you could grab off that fat wad the Quincy-Scott people hung under your nose, you wouldn't have no objections, would you?"

Scanlan's hand dropped on Hanvey's shoulder and he gazed earnestly into the eyes of the detective, Corwin for the moment forgotten. "Honest, Jim, I'm runnin' straight. I ain't plannin' a thing. So leave me be, won't you?"

"I ain't aimin' to bother you none, Billy. Goodness knows you're too much of a gent to be in jail. Only it just struck me that I was doin' you a favor by introducin' you to Mr. Corwin, him an' you both bein' genuine swells an' li'ble to have a heap in common."

Suddenly reawakened to consciousness of Corwin's presence, Scanlan pulled himself together. "Mr. Hanvey is bound to have his little joke, Mr. Corwin. A very interesting chap, isn't he?"

Corwin inclined his head gravely. "Very."

Hanvey regarded them amusedly. "You fellers like each other?"

They nodded.

"That's fine! I'm sure glad!" He turned away, then swung back suddenly. "By the way, Billy, we're leaving on the California Limited Friday morning, ten o'clock. We've got drawin' room A in car S-17. I'm tellin' you so you can get your reservations early on that train. Eastern travel is awful thick these days."

They parted from the bewildered Scanlan. In the sanctuary of Hanvey's room Gerald Corwin voiced his displeasure.

"You are probably a very great detective, Mr. Hanvey—"

"Naw! Not me! I'm just a fat, lucky bum."

"But it strikes me that you volunteered some valuable information unnecessarily."

"To Billy?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"About our reservations east. Why did you tell him the correct day?"

"I never lie to a crook," said Jim gravely. "It ain't fair. Besides, if they're good enough crooks to be worth lyin' to, a feller ain't gonna get away with it. Billy will check up, an' once he found I'd lied to him he'd lose all confidence in me."

"But I don't see what difference it makes."

"That's 'cause you're a businessman, son. Detectives an' crooks know the value of tellin' the truth."

"You didn't have to tell him who I was."

"No-o, that's true. But it saved him a heap of trouble."

"I don't understand your desire to save him trouble."

"It's this way, Mr. Corwin: The less trouble Billy has to take, the more time he'll have for thinkin', an' the more he thinks, the worse off he is. Thinkin', son, has ruined a heap of happy homes, an' don't you forget it."

Hanvey was right. At that moment Billy Scanlan was slumped in a chair in the hotel lobby, smoking cigarette after cigarette and wondering what it all meant. He knew Jim Hanvey of old, was familiar with the working methods of the ponderous, slow-moving, quick-thinking detective; and he knew that Jim had told the truth. Of course he'd check up, but that was a mere formality. All the more prominent criminals knew that Jim Hanvey did not lie. That was one explanation of the high esteem in which they held him—because he played fair.

Scanlan was worried. He had been entrusted with a definite mission, one well suited to his peculiar talents. His job was to secure from Gerald Corwin the proxy which Corwin was to receive from Colonel

Robert E. Warrington and to deliver that proxy to the men who were fighting to wrest control of the K. R. & P. from the McIntosh interests. That was all. The sky was the limit so far as he was concerned. His professional reputation was at stake. Besides, the reward offered by the Quincy-Scott crowd was stupendous, and Billy was sadly in need of ready cash—and plenty of it.

The presence of Jim Hanvey complicated matters somewhat in the way of accomplishing a task already difficult and delicate. But Billy was game and not entirely averse to matching wits with the gargantuan detective. So he waited patiently in the lobby, watching the elevator bank and eventually he was rewarded when Gerald Corwin descended, walked swiftly to the street, and hailed a taxi.

As he drove off, Scanlan stepped into another cab. "Follow that cab ahead. Keep about a block in the rear. When he stops, you stop." As Scanlan drove off, he glanced over his shoulder in time to see the ungainly figure of Jim Hanvey climb laboriously into yet a third taxi. He did not quite fathom Jim's motive in following, but he didn't care particularly. He knew that Jim knew he'd trail Corwin. So much for that.

Corwin's taxi driver, evidently aware that his fare was unfamiliar with the vastness of Los Angeles, selected a circuitous route to the Wilshire Boulevard address of Colonel Warrington. He drove through the traffic to Pico and via that important thoroughfare to Western Avenue, swinging across then to the fashionable Wilshire section, a tremendous area of spotlessly white homes, immaculate lawns, stiff and artificial gardening, and aggressive affluence. Before the gates of a huge home, the grounds of which occupied an entire block, Corwin's taxi stopped. Gerald retained his man and entered the Warrington mansion. A block farther down Wilshire Boulevard Scanlan's taxi halted, and a half block behind that Jim Hanvey left his taxi.

Jim, alone of the three, dismissed his driver. And then slowly and purposefully, puffing on a cigar, Jim waddled up the street toward Scanlan's automobile. "Lo, Billy!"

"Hello, Jim."

"Have a good ride?"

"Pretty good."

"Just wanted to let you know I follered you, Billy. All I done it for was to make sure you was watchin' young Corwin yonder. I'll be trottin' back to town now." He addressed Scanlan's driver: "Which street-car do I take to get back to town?"

The driver vouchsafed the desired information. Scanlan could not forbear a question. "Where's your taxi, Jim?"

"I let it go. Taxis are terribly expensive." And Hanvey moved heavily away.

Scanlan's vigil continued for more than an hour. Then through the

gates of the Warrington home swung a limousine. It stopped briefly while Corwin alighted, paid his taxi, and then returned to the big car. The route into the city was more direct this time, and Scanlan followed Corwin and Colonel Warrington into one of the larger Broadway office buildings. He saw them enter the offices of a law firm and knew that Corwin had won the first move of the game of persuading Warrington to issue his proxy in favor of the McIntosh interests.

From his vantage point in the marbled hallway Scanlan kept watch. Eventually he saw a young man emerge from the offices of the firm of lawyers and enter a smaller office down the hall which was marked REAL ESTATE & INSURANCE. NOTARY PUBLIC. A second young man returned with the first, and in his hand was a small notarial seal. It was obvious to Scanlan that if there was a notary in the law firm he was out at the moment. Alone again, Scanlan ascertained the name of the notary—Leopold Jones.

When Warrington and Corwin descended in an elevator a few minutes later, Scanlan did not follow. Instead he produced from his pocket an income tax blank and went with it to the office of Leopold Jones. Of that young gentleman he requested an attestation of his income tax return. Mr. Jones found Mr. Scanlan an engaging talker, and they chatted for several minutes. When Mr. Scanlan eventually departed, Mr. Jones was happily unaware of the fact that in Mr. Scanlan's coat pocket reposed his, Mr. Jones's, notarial seal.

From the office building Scanlan visited the city ticket office of the Santa Fe Railroad. He learned readily enough that drawing room A in car S-17, California Limited, for Friday morning had been sold the day previous to a very fat gentleman. He bought compartment C in the same car. He returned to the hotel.

Thus far, things appeared propitious for Mr. Scanlan.

Jim was a hindrance, of course, and a grave one, but Scanlan operated on the theory that no vigilance is so keen that it cannot be eluded. There remained nothing now save the trip east. At some time between the departure from Los Angeles and the arrival in Chicago it was incumbent upon Mr. Scanlan to secure from Corwin the Warrington proxy.

That night—Wednesday—the three men dined together, Corwin's distaste swallowed up by his keening interest in the peculiar friendship existing between Hanvey and Scanlan. Corwin had always held the idea that criminals and detectives clashed on sight; that the former were habitually in flight and the latter constantly in pursuit. To see them chatting amiably about topics in general, reminiscing over past escapades of Scanlan and exploits of other criminals and swapping theories on unsolved crimes was astounding. Corwin found it hard to reconcile himself to the fact that at the moment the portly de-

tective and the would-be-gentleman crook were engaged in a battle of wits. He later discussed the matter with Hanvey.

"Why don't you arrest Scanlan?"

"Arrest him? He ain't done nothin'."

"He's planning to."

"You can't arrest a man for what he's got in his head. If you could, the jails'd be overflowin'."

"You could arrest him for that McCarthy affair I heard him telling you about. He confesses he was involved in the swindle."

"Aw, you know I wouldn't touch him for that! He just passed that dope on as a friend."

"But I didn't know that policemen and criminals were friends."

Hanvey smiled wistfully. "'Bout the only friends I got in this world, son, are crooks. Most of them are servin' time. Some of 'em I put there. But we're friends. This here solid gold watch charm—that was given me by one of the niftiest con men in the world. I sure hated to send him up."

They checked out of the hotel Friday morning. Billy Scanlan was at the station when they arrived. The heavy train rumbled under the shed, and they settled themselves for the three day journey to Chicago. At Hanvey's invitation Scanlan joined them in the drawing room, and they became absorbed in a game of setback at half a cent a point.

Hanvey and Scanlan waxed violently enthusiastic over the game—"King for high." "Trey low?" "Well, doggone your ornery hide—" "You're a rotten setback player, Mr. Corwin; y'oughta learn somethin' 'bout the fine points of the game."

Nothing to indicate that a crisis was approaching, no outward manifestation of the drama which was imminent. Occasionally Corwin reassured himself by touching his coat, in the lining of which was sewed the envelope containing the proxy which controlled a railroad. Once Hanvey saw the gesture, and he laughed. "It's safe all right, son. It'll stay safe unless you lose your coat."

Corwin flushed angrily. Hanvey rightly interpreted his anger and extended a fat and reassuring hand. "I wasn't giving no dope away. Billy knew where you had the proxy, didn't you, Billy?"

Scanlan nodded. "Sure! It's the regular place."

Both men—detective and criminal—were vastly amused by Corwin's obviousness, and Corwin knew it. But he didn't care. Perhaps the lining of a coat was the regular place to keep a valuable document; certainly it was a safe one, and Hanvey might have been more careful than to remove the last vestige of doubt from Scanlan's mind. Corwin knew that Scanlan could not possibly get the proxy. Such a thing was impossible during the day, and at night Corwin planned to use the coat as a pillow.

Following a light breakfast the next morning Corwin made his way forward to the club car for a shave. He removed coat, collar, and tie, for the moment unmindful of Scanlan. When the hot towel was removed from his face and fresh lather applied, he noticed Scanlan sitting with two other men, awaiting his turn for a shave. Next to Scanlan was Jim Hanvey. Corwin sighed relievedly.

The barber shaved the right side of Corwin's face, then turned him in the chair to get at the other side. As he did so, Scanlan cast a glance of simulated impatience at the waiting men, rose, donned coat and hat, and left the club car.

But the coat which Scanlan wore on leaving the car was Corwin's!

In five minutes' time he returned. Corwin was just emerging from the chair. Hanvey was slumped in a corner immersed in the very female pictures of a weekly periodical. Scanlan removed Corwin's coat and extended it to that young gentleman. "Took your coat by accident, Mr. Corwin. Just discovered my mistake."

Corwin's face blanched. He grabbed the coat and touched the spot where the proxy had been. For a single wild instant Corwin contemplated bodily assault, and only the hulking figure of Jim Hanvey and his slow, drawling voice prevented him.

"What's the matter, son? What's the matter? You look all het up."  
"This thief—"

"Whoa, son, whoa! That ain't no kind of a name to call a crook."

Corwin whirled on Hanvey. "You don't know what you're talking about! This man has that proxy! He just stole it from me!"

Jim was unperturbed. He turned mildly reproving eyes upon the amused countenance of his friend. "You didn't go an' do that, did you, Billy?"

Scanlan grinned. "Mr. Corwin seems to think so."

"Well, I'll be doggoned! Let's git together an' kinder talk things over."

Back through the swaying, grinding cars went the procession, Scanlan leading, Hanvey next, and Corwin bringing up the rear. Corwin was in a cold fury. He felt that he was being made ridiculous—they were laughing at him. He didn't like the looks of the whole business anyway. What assurance had he that Hanvey and Scanlan were not confederates? They were suspiciously intimate, and Hanvey must have seen Scanlan—

In the privacy of their drawing room Corwin's sinewy figure towered over Scanlan. "If you don't give me back that proxy, I'll break every bone in your rotten body."

Jim restrained the young man. "Them's awful harsh words, Jack Dalton."

Corwin shook him off. "I think you're as crooked as he is. I've had



my suspicions from the first, and I'm not going to allow any pair like you to make a monkey of me."

It was Scanlan who spoke. "Just what are you going to do about it, Mr. Corwin?"

"I'll do aplenty!"

"Giving me a licking isn't going to get you anywhere except in jail. We're in New Mexico now, and if you lay a finger on me, I'll have you dumped in the Albuquerque lockup tonight, and you can't do the same to me because you haven't got a lick of proof."

"Will you let us search you and your compartment?"

"Surest thing you know!" He turned to the detective. "C'mon, Jim. Get busy."

Hanvey shrugged and reached for one of his black cigars. "Ain't gonna waste my time, Billy. If you've got that proxy, there ain't no use of my searchin' for it now. I've just got to think things over and get a hunch where you put it. Then I'll get it."

"Do you mean," interrogated Corwin furiously, "that you're not even going to search this man?"

"I do. I mean just that exact thing, son."

"Well, I will!"

Scanlan meekly submitted to the search. Once as Corwin's trembling, clumsy fingers probed into a pocket he deliberately winked at Hanvey, and at the conclusion of the personal search Scanlan led the way to his compartment. Twenty minutes later Corwin, dispirited and dully angry, returned to the drawing room, where he found Hanvey gazing stolidly out of the window. The detective spoke without turning his head.

"When you git peeved, son, you sure git peeved all over."

The younger man did not answer. He slouched opposite and tried to think, to piece together the ends of this tangled skein. He was distrustful of everyone, particularly of the slothful Hanvey. Jim's only other remark did not add to his comfort.

"You sure was careless with that coat, Mr. Corwin—awful careless."

Hanvey was right. He had been careless, inexcusably so. True, there had been a feeling of safety in the knowledge that Hanvey was also in the barber shop, but there was small solace in the thought that it wasn't entirely his fault that too great confidence had been placed by his employer in Hanvey's ability. And now, should Hanvey fail to recover the proxy, he—Corwin—was ruined, a brilliant career abruptly and ignominiously terminated.

Meanwhile, in compartment C, behind a locked door, Scanlan was busy. He obtained a table from the porter and then proceeded to open his suitcase, to unpack it, to remove a false bottom and extract from

the space disclosed a sheaf of legal-appearing documents. Each of these was strikingly similar to the proxy which lay beside them on the table.

Then, slowly and painstakingly, Scanlan prepared a duplicate proxy, being very careful that his forging of Colonel Warrington's name should be patently a forgery. The finished job was a masterpiece. No one unfamiliar with Warrington's signature could guess that this was not genuine, yet a comparison left no room for doubt that Scanlan's work was a forgery. Carefully he inscribed the attestation, affixing thereto the impress of the notarial seal he had stolen from the office of Mr. Leopold Jones. That done, he viewed his handiwork with pardonable pride. He next destroyed the other blank proxies which had been prepared by the Quincy-Scott crowd in New York, placed the forged proxy in the false bottom of his suitcase, and put the genuine proxy in an outside pocket of his coat.

At lunchtime Scanlan found Hanvey sitting alone at one end of the diner while Corwin sulked at the other. The crook paused by the detective's table and cheerfully accepted Hanvey's invitation to join him. Jim nodded toward the tragic figure at the other end of the car.

"You sure have played tarnation thunder with that kid, Billy."

Scanlan shook his head. Naturally tenderhearted, he was genuinely regretful. "Business is business, Jim."

"Yep, so it is. Kinda tough on the kid, though. He feels bad, knowin' he played right into your hands. An' I ain't feelin' any too spry myself." The detective's dull eyes turned toward his companion and blinked slowly. "Where have you got that proxy, Billy?"

Scanlan laughed. "I haven't admitted that I have it."

"No-o. An' I didn't ask you to admit nothin'. The point bein' that you can't get away with it, kid. I'll have you held when we get to Chicago and search you—a search that is a search."

Scanlan registered apprehension. "That ain't fair, Jim. You ain't got a lick of proof that I have the proxy."

"Nope. But I intend to get it."

From the diner Scanlan went back to the observation platform to think things over. He did not relish the prospect of an additional thirty-six hours in the same car with Hanvey. He contemplated dropping off at Albuquerque, then thought better of it. Jim would merely remain with him. And then an idea came.

At eight o'clock the train pulled into the handsome station at the capital of New Mexico for a one hour layover. Scanlan walked swiftly up the street toward the post office. There he prevailed upon a registry clerk to accept a letter. In a long envelope he enclosed a note to Phares Scott and with it the proxy he had that day stolen from Gerald Corwin. He sent the document both special delivery and regis-

tered. It would get to New York a day or two later, perhaps, but still in ample time for the meeting. Besides, it was not essential that it get there at all. It was only necessary that the McIntosh forces be deprived of its possession. Scanlan would have destroyed the thing in preference, but he knew that he would have difficulty in collecting his fee unless the document itself was produced.

But even though Billy Scanlan had left the train at Albuquerque, Hanvey and Corwin had not. Hanvey, making quite sure that Scanlan had gone, entered Scanlan's compartment in Corwin's company. The manner of the big detective had momentarily lost its sluggishness. He questioned Corwin. "Where'd you search?"

Corwin told him. Jim shook his massive head. "How 'bout his suitcase?"

"I looked in there, of course."

"Sure—of course you did, son. Naturally. But let's us try it again."

Jim dumped the contents unceremoniously on the seat. With deft fingers he went through every garment and even inspected the contents of the rolled traveling case.

"You see," commented Corwin resentfully. "I told you nothing was there."

Hanvey paid him no heed. He had closed the suitcase and was inspecting it carefully. Then suddenly he turned it over and thumped it with a heavy, spatulate finger. His pursy lips creased into a smile.

"Think we got somethin', son."

"What?"

"We'll see."

The suitcase was reopened, and Hanvey fumbled inside for a moment. Then a button unfastened here and one there, and he removed the false bottom. He extended the envelope to Corwin. "Better see that he don't get another chance at it, son."

With fingers that trembled the younger man spread open the forged proxy, never questioning its genuineness. There it was—Warrington's signature, Jones's attestation, the notarial seal. Corwin seized Jim's hand and wrung it gratefully. His voice was choky.

"I've been a rotter, Mr. Hanvey. I suspected you of being a confederate—"

"S'all right, Mr. Corwin. 'S'all right. Don't slop over."

"I can't help it. I feel like a cur."

"Gwan!" Hanvey was touched by the boyish gratitude of his young friend. "Let's get this stuff back in here. Scanlan'll spot that we have the thing, but it wouldn't be decent to leave his stuff all spread out like this."

Ten minutes before leaving time Scanlan returned to his compartment. He opened his suitcase, discerning the disorder—and grinned.

Then, pretending disappointment and fury, he rapped on the door of drawing room A. Inside he faced Corwin.

"You wanted to start something a little while ago, Mr. Corwin," he snapped, "when you thought I copped a paper from your coat. Well, I'm here to say that whenever you're ready you just wade right in because, no matter what I've done, I never robbed a gent's suitcase."

A hard, chill smile appeared on Corwin's lips. He rose slowly. From the window seat Hanvey viewed the tableau amusedly.

"Get out!" ordered Corwin.

"Put me out!"

"Get out or I shall!"

Scanlan's eyes met those of the other man, and Scanlan discreetly withdrew.

But that night Scanlan lay in his berth, smoking and smiling. Success had blessed his strategy. The Warrington proxy was en route to New York by registered mail, the envelope specifically marked "For Delivery to Addressee Only." Better still, Jim Hanvey thought he had recovered the document. There was the strongest point in Scanlan's favor—the fact that Jim was smugly contented. Now all he had to do was to assume the attitude of a man thwarted. He was a trifle sorry for poor old Jim, yet it was no lack of acumen on Jim's part but rather a superlative cunning on his own.

During the final twenty-four hours of the journey to Chicago, Gerald Corwin clung to the supposed proxy with a pitiful grimness. Alone with Hanvey in their drawing room he sat with his hand against the pocket of his coat. He shaved himself. He slept with the coat for a pillow. "He got it once," he explained to Hanvey. "He won't again."

Jim smiled. "Once ought to be enough for any man."

"What made you think of a false bottom to that suitcase, Mr. Hanvey?"

"Same thing that made Billy think of the lining of your coat. Plumb obvious. Gosh! I'll bet Billy's ravin'."

Corwin was frankly admiring. "And I thought you were no good! I even thought you might be doublecrossing McIntosh!"

"That's right, son; that's right. Never trust nobody, an' you'll never get a shock. That's my motto. The honestest a person is supposed to be the easier he can crook you."

They reached Chicago at noon on the following day. Hanvey and Corwin boarded the Pennsylvania for New York. Scanlan secured a berth on the New York Central. Freed from the Scanlan menace, Corwin thawed slightly and attempted to make late amends to his benefactor. He even summoned sufficient courage to request a closer inspection of Jim's gold toothpick and to say complimentary things

about the fearful weapon which had been anathema to him. Jim bloomed under the praise of his decoration.

"Feller that gave me that had sense," he said earnestly. "It ain't only beautiful—it's useful."

Corwin repressed a shudder. "I suppose it is."

The gratitude of the younger man was pathetic. He grimly determined to invite Jim to dinner some night—the ultimate test of his fortitude.

They reached New York on time and repaired immediately to the offices of the K. R. & P. There Gerald Corwin delivered over to Garet McIntosh the Warrington proxy. McIntosh congratulated the young man and assured him of the directors' appreciation. But before leaving the room Corwin made a straight-eyed confession. "You must thank Mr. Hanvey," he said. "The proxy was stolen from me on the train, and Mr. Hanvey recovered it."

"Good!" McIntosh dismissed Corwin with a nod and reached for his notebook. "How about it, Hanvey?"

Jim grinned. "Don't listen to nothin' the kid says, Mr. McIntosh. He's game all through, that lad. But it was funny."

At that moment Billy Scanlan faced Phares Scott and gave a detailed report of the success of his mission. A gleam of admiration appeared in the steely eyes of the financier.

"Good work!" he commented briefly. "You'll get your pay when the proxy arrives."

The following day at noon Scanlan presented himself at Scott's office. His reward was paid in legal tender—"To avoid the embarrassment of a check." Scanlan nodded and pocketed the money.

"The proxy?" he questioned.

"We've destroyed it. Simply wanted to look it over to make sure we were safe."

That night Billy Scanlan celebrated. The following morning he awakened with a violent headache and was aroused by a ringing of his telephone.

"Jim Hanvey," announced the slow, drawling voice on the other end. "Can I come up?"

Jim came. He regarded Scanlan interestedly. "I judge they paid you off all right," he commented.

"They did," admitted Scanlan. "What about it?"

"Nothin'; nothin' in particular." Hanvey glanced at his watch, a tremendous affair, gaudily engraved. "Only that the stockholders' meetin' takes place in just about one hour, an' as a friend I advise you to beat it an' beat it quick."

Scanlan sat upright, hands pressed against his throbbing forehead. "Me beat it?"

"Uh-huh."

"What for?"

"Takin' pay from the Quincy-Scott crowd for somethin' you didn't do. They're li'ble to get awful sore."

"What are you talking about, Jim? You know good and well I got away with it."

Hanvey shook his head. "Nothin' of the kind, Billy, an' I'm advisin' you as a friend to beat it—an' stay put."

The eyes of the other man narrowed. "You must be gettin' into your second childhood, Jim. Do you mean to tell me that you haven't yet found out that the proxy you stole from my suitcase was a fake?"

Hanvey's voice was quite matter-of-fact. "Oh, that? Sure, I knew all the time that it was a fake."

"Well, then—"

"What you ain't never stopped to realize," explained the detective, "is this: The proxy you swiped from young Corwin wasn't no good either."

Scanlan rose abruptly. "What do you mean—no good? Old man Warrington executed it—"

"Sure he did! An' the next day he executed another to McIntosh. That second one was the only one worth the paper it was written on. It nullified the first, an' I had it in my pocket all the time. An' when that real proxy appears at the meetin' today, the gang you were workin' for is li'ble to get all het up. You see, Billy, you and Corwin both had the wrong dope. I wasn't on that train to keep you from gettin' that proxy off Corwin; I was there to see you did get it so you wouldn't bother me none, me bein' the real messenger."

Headache forgotten, Billy Scanlan leaped for his suitcase and commenced a frenzy of packing. "I might've known you were too easy, Jim! I might've known it! Anyway, they paid me off yesterday—"

"That's what tickles me," replied Jim, "you gittin' paid for that proxy. It's a swell joke on them fellers. An' say, I got somethin' to show you. You know young Corwin was awful grateful for what I done."

"He should have been."

"He was. He sent me a present this morning. Ain't it swell?"

And beaming with pride Hanvey exhibited the gift of the fastidious Gerald Corwin.

It was a gold-handled toothbrush.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**I**n **An Unfortunate Prairie Occurrence** (Hyperion, \$22.95) by Jamie Harrison, Sheriff Jules Clement patrols his hometown, the tiny burg of Blue Deer, Montana, nestled up against Yellowstone under its Big Sky dome. Late fall doesn't generally find Jules's beat a hotbed of crime, but when it rains, it pours. A tourist has leapt into the river and disappeared. A serial rapist is terrorizing the women-folk. Jules's attractive new deputy has singlehandedly turned his "no fraternizing" rule into a personal challenge, while two old friends and their eccentric neighbor appear to be headed for a reenactment of the infamous Hatfield-McCoy feud. When the skeleton of a young man, murdered decades earlier, is found by a camper on property owned by Jules's favorite uncle, old alliances are reformed and a prosperous old-timer turns up dead. In the laconic style of her young hero, Harrison weaves a number of colorful characters and plot threads into a compelling story that could only come out of her setting and time.

By contrast, **See No Evil** (St. Martin's, \$22.95) by Eleanor Taylor Bland is fast-paced and edgy. This is the sixth in a strong series featuring black policewoman Marti MacAlister, a former Chicago cop who fled with her kids to the safer suburb of Lincoln Prairie. Marti is an admirable hero, a dogged and caring cop, a concerned friend and mother, who's uncommonly blessed with good sense. When she learns that a killer has followed a young girl from the Windy City to her town, Marti wants him. Told from several points of view—including those of a crazy stalker who's making himself at home in her home when Marti and her kids aren't there and a lonely homeless man—Bland's novel captures the hope and the despair of life on Marti's beat.

Michael Connelly's latest suspense novel, **Blood Work** (Little, Brown, \$23.95), introduces Terry McCaleb, retired former FBI agent whose job was tracking serial killers. Terry is recovering from a heart transplant; his only goal at the moment is to restore his father's boat,



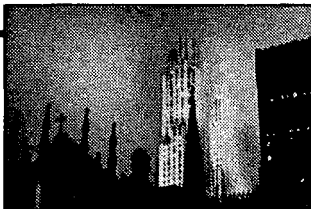
where he now lives. Then he learns from the sister of a murdered woman where his heart came from, and at her request he agrees to look into the murder. By doing so he unwittingly enters a maze created by a brilliant psychotic who means to rob Terry of his life in a manner more horrible than simple death. Connelly has garnered many fans with previous novels, and they won't be disappointed with his latest effort.

Graham Thomas's **Malice in the Highlands** (Ivy, \$5.50) is the perfect choice for readers nostalgic for the good, old fashioned British village mystery. Our hero is Detective Chief Superintendent Erskine Powell of New Scotland Yard; in this debut mystery he's on his annual holiday. Life is good. Powell has acquired reservations—including salmon fishing rights along the river—at the old, family-run Salar Lodge. The proprietors welcome his return, fellow anglers are bragging about their catches, and an old schoolchum happens to be staying in the area, adding to the fellowship. But the wild and hauntingly beautiful Scottish Highlands are not free of the dark passions that stalk London streets, and too soon Powell finds himself lending a hand in the investigation of the murder of a wealthy neighboring landholder. Thomas has added some action to his tale, but it is the quiet puzzling of Powell and the powerful evocation of the setting that make this mystery so enjoyable.

Philip Kerr's **Esau** (Pocket, \$6.99) should thrill both the large group of readers who gobble up Michael Crichton's latest and the hordes of folks who have recently put mountain-climbing adventures on the nonfiction bestseller lists. Wild-card climber Jack Furness is scaling a forbidden Himalayan peak when a terrifying avalanche tosses him into an ice cave. There he discovers a perfectly preserved skull, which he smuggles out as a gift for former lover and ambitious paleoanthropologist Stella Swift. It's an incredible find, and Stella determines to mount an expedition of hand-picked scientists with Jack as their guide. *Esau* is filled with details of mountain climbing and rescue, cold-weather gear and survival, scientific speculation surrounding an Abominable Snowman, and space-age equipment. For good measure (and even more action) Kerr has also thrown in a potential nuclear disaster in the area, a psychotic Pentagon operative disguised as member of the team, and an imaginative peek into the habitat of a legendary creature. What more could you want of a technothriller?

# THE STORY THAT WON

The January Mystery was won by Robert Michigan. Honorable Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Succasunna, New Jersey; Melbourne, Florida; Sudford, Vermont; Alfred California; James Daniels of Port Ludlow, Washington; David Gott of Beaverton, Oregon; Denise Irwin of Baltimore, Maryland; and Diane Coutr  of Santa Monica, California.



ous Photograph contest Kesling of Ann Arbor, mentions go to J. F. Robert Allen Frister of sey; James Hagerty of san MacKay of Brad-

W. Cross of Sacramento,

*Photo by Rolan Fajardo*

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## WEB OF THE SPIDER by Robert Kesling

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Our Chief of Intelligence, Balkan Division, closed the door before announcing, "Agent X has delivered precise locations of Iraqi germ warfare laboratories."

"Quite a coup!" commented Agent John Garver. "You have it secured?"

"Absolutely," said the chief. "It's in my safe yonder. Not even Rumanian secret police suspect we are anything but an import business. This office is on the twenty-fourth floor of the only skyscraper in Cladescu, floodlighted at night. I've installed high-voltage devices at all doors, and my men guard elevators and rooftop."

"Wise precautions, sir," I said.

"Yes," declared the chief. "Only Spider Man himself could get in here tonight."

After Garver left to check our warehouse inventory, the chief turned to me. "Such information is a tempting target, worth billions. Meet me tonight behind the old cathedral."

We huddled in the chill mist rolling up from the Guvonic River. "What's that you're carrying?" I inquired.

"A newly developed holographic projector," he replied. As we watched, a figure scaled the building. When it reached the twentieth floor, the chief flicked on the projector. Unbelievably, a giant three-dimensional spider began descending the sheer face. The climber spotted it, screamed in terror, and fell . . . down . . . down . . .

I dashed forward. "My God, sir!" I gasped. "It's John Garver!"

"Yes," said the chief. "I suspected he was a traitor."

I shuddered. "A horrible death. But your report from Agent X is safe."

As he turned away, the chief declared unemotionally, "There was no report. 'Agent X' never existed."

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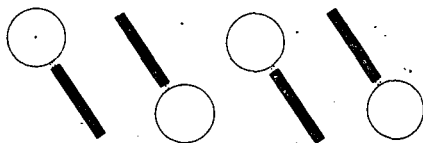
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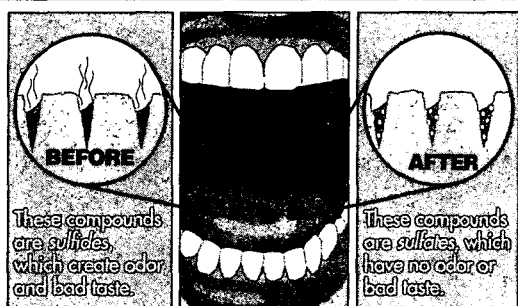
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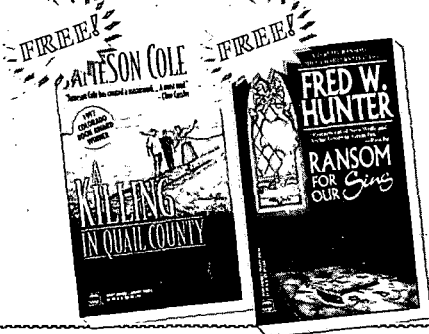
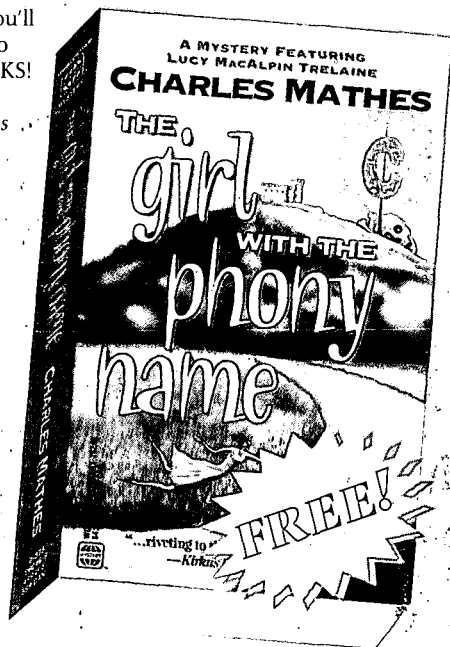
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